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SECOND EDITION

METHUEN & CO.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.
LONDON

[1906]
H,T,

TO NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
163419A
ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
R 1924 L

First Published . . July 1906
Second Edition . . September 1906

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" You were made from the twilight and rain,
From your hair with its ebon bloom,
To your feet that the stars would stain,
You were all gathered out of the gloom."

The Night Girl

L

MAVE

I

A DOVECOT FLUTTERED

IN the small market town Robert Trayner was esteemed a man of fashion. A youth of pleasant designs, he had a graceful yet ingratiating carriage, was gallant, free-hearted, and virile in blood, albeit somewhat adolescent and intoxicated with rose wine. He had been deputed to transact certain businesses in the little market town by an uncle to whom he was affectionately attached, but who, although his fortune commanded respect and some show of obedience, was of so mild and easy-going a temperament as to be a bad taskmaster for a young man of Robert's build. At least half Robert's days were free for such amusements as the town offered, but the time lay heavily on his hands. He had made resolutions, and endeavoured to employ his hours honestly, chatting with John Meff on cattle, playing an occasional rubber with a horse jockey, a poor army captain, and an old attorney, and enjoying a daily stroll in full regalia along the high street.

"Who is that gentleman that's always a-walking here in the green coat—the one with the dark hair, I mean?" asked an amiable young lady behind a ribbon-counter of her companion.

"How should I know or care either?"

"I seed you then, I'm sure, looking at him often enough."

"No, really no; I have not noticed him."

"He's a fine man, and if he knows it, small blame to him," said the amiable young lady, with a sigh.

She had seen "the town," had served members of the gentry in divers capacities, and was at a loss to understand why Mr. Robert Trayner did not take notice of her on strength of such recommendations, which, truth to tell, were plainly manifest in her person.

"He's unhappy, I think," said she to her companion.

"I have no thought for him, I assure you, Miss Emma."

"How fine we are! Just as if it mattered to him what you thought!"

"Don't be so ill-natured, Emma. I'm sure I don't bother about the young man."

The little shop was the property of an old lady, aunt to Miss Emma Wardale, otherwise the amiable young lady behind the ribbon-counter. Miss Emma had bold eyes and a high laugh, which had caused the elder Miss Wardale, then approaching her sixty-seventh birthday, much anxiety. When Emma had been in "the town," certain unkind rumours had penetrated even to the quiet provincial market causeway, and the elder Miss Wardale had scoured her furrowed cheeks with weeping, and spilt her grey soul before God in prayer for her niece's sustenance in virtue. The niece truly had been frail, but now that Aunt Wardale felt she was dying, she was disposed to forgive much, and Emma was duly installed behind the ribbon-counter. Indeed the property was designed for her at the aunt's death, and now she divided her time between rehearsing the offices of

proprietorship and thinking on the manly graces of Mr. Robert Trayner.

Her companion was plagued daily with questions regarding this mysterious stranger.

"Has he passed the window yet?" she asked, on coming into the shop one early morning.

"Who? I have no idea——"

"Come, Miss Deceitful, answer my question."

"You mean the young man with the fine cambrics in the green coat?"

"Yes, yes. But pray how do you know he wears fine cambrics?"

"I noticed him yesterday when——"

"When you were ogling him out of the window, I suppose? I should blush for shame at such conduct."

". . . I have not seen him this morning."

"Very well, then you can tell me when he does pass," said Miss Emma, with a flounce.

Her companion nodded and pondered once more over her basket. Emma stationed herself near the window in a position advantageous for watching the movements of the street, and opened her latest volume from the library. She turned the pages backwards and forwards but could find nothing to enchain her attention, and in final disgust flung the volume on the counter, folded her arms and fell to studying the assistant. The girl saw that she was observed and cowered before the scrutiny of those bold, challenging eyes. She was always confused when under close observance, even though the observer was a woman. Emma examined her and was puzzled, as she had been puzzled a dozen times before, by the same problem. The girl fascinated her against her better reason. Emma began to tap her little foot in irritation. . . . Gracious, no one

could call the girl beautiful! She was slim and tall to a fault; the meanest woman would make two of her in bulk. Her breasts were hardly perceptible, she had no colour, and her hair was always in a tangle. She was doomed to eternal spinsterhood, for surely no man would look at such a creature! . . . And yet Miss Emma was aggravated because she confessed to her inmost heart that, in spite of manifold blemishes and neutral colours, the girl possessed some vague, indefinable charm that eluded all description. Even Miss Emma Wardale, lounging back in her window-seat, saw thus far; saw, with the grace of intuition, deep enough into her companion to be somewhat quietened and indeed a little awed.

"Have you ever been in love, miss?" she asked presently, sighing over her own experiences of the tender passion.

"Indeed, no."

"Never had a thought for a man?"

"Oh yes, often."

Miss Emma bridled.

"Oh, we are not so innocent after all, are we? Tell me about it."

"About what?"

"About your affair."

"My affair! Oh, Emma, I don't understand you a bit. I wish you wouldn't talk so strange."

"Bah! I've never met such ignorance; you disgust me."

"Don't be so angry, Emma. You know I've never been to "the town," and can't talk with you."

The "town" allusion was as oil on troubled waters. Miss Emma was mollified.

"Have you then, really, miss, never had an affair?"

"Never."

"But when I asked you if you had ever had a thought for a man, you answered, 'Yes, often.'"

"So I have."

"Well, tell me all about it. I asked you before, you know."

"There was a gentleman who used to bring me little presents at Mrs. Hallowes."

"Before you came to my aunt's?"

"Oh yes, long before that."

"Upon my word, you started young, miss. And did you think a lot of the gentleman?"

"Oh yes, a great deal. I was always thinking of him, and waiting for his presents."

"His presents! What were they?"

"Cakes and sugar sweets."

"Poor enough! What sort of man was he?"

"Very handsome, Emma."

"Tall?"

"Yes."

"And did he kiss you?"

"Always."

Miss Emma Wardale's system received a severe shock.

"Don't play the innocent to me again," said she; "not that I ever thought you were anything but free, miss."

"Free, Emma!"

"Yes, free. What were you to him, that he should touzle you whenever he liked?"

"He—was fond of me, I think."

"And you, miss?"

"I was fond of him."

"Where is he now, child?"

"Dead."

"Did you weep?"

"Yes."

"How coldly you speak. If it had been my affair, I should have been quite inconsolable."

"But you see, Emma, it was to be expected."

"Expected?"

"Yes."

"What was to be expected, pray?"

"His death, Emma."

"Was he long ill, then?"

"No, not long ill, but so old."

"So old!"

"Yes, Emma."

"Good gracious! How unnatural!"

"Unnatural?"

"Yes, miss, unnatural to love a man who is so old."

"I have never thought that, Emma."

"Indeed haven't you. I call it abominable."

"Why, Emma?"

"Never mind why."

"Oh, tell me why."

"No."

"Please do."

"I will not. Come, how old was this man?"

"The gentleman I was fond of?"

"Yes, the gentleman who brought you presents, and kissed you every time you met, and was so old! How old was he?"

"Over seventy."

"My God, miss! Over seventy!"

"Yes. I was seven."

Miss Emma Wardale flung her book across the counter. She sprang smartly to her feet and smacked the white, perplexed face that stared up at her from

over the ribbon-basket. The girl scurried behind the counter and wept.

"A fine mess you'll make of your face," cried Miss Emma, stamping her foot.

"Oh, you are cruel—very cruel. My cheek is on fire."

"And serve you right, for your impudence. If you think to make mock of me you are mistaken."

"Emma, you are mad!"

"Indeed, no."

"I never made mock of you."

"I say you did, slut; I say you did."

"I never wanted to make mock of you; really, I never did. I want you to be kind to me."

"Well, dry your eyes. What customers will think, I don't know. Go and dry your eyes, this minute."

Miss Emma picked up her book, and became suddenly unaccountably absorbed in that which she had previously found so singularly lacking in interest. Her companion sidled from the shop in sobs. She stood before her mirror and smoothed the flushed cheek with peevish fingers. The girl was glamoured by the faintest touch of sorrow.

"Oh, I hate her—I hate her!" she cried in sudden tempest. "I hope she dies for being so cruel. I do hate her. I hope she dies."

She stroked the flushed cheek compassionately.

"Poor cheek! Why should she hurt you? Poor cheek!"

Her heart was full of self-pity. She was a white, rose-bosomed creature, all dewy and fay-like, with night in her hair. Her eyes were troublous with waking womanhood. Although slender she was

dimpled in parts; about the arms and hands almost like a babe. Her body was young, just mellowing to ripeness and exquisite with suggestion and fair promise. Her mouth was chaste; the lips carved in tender curves. Her name was Mave.

II

THE STRANGE PHYSICIAN

MR. ROBERT TRAYNER lounged in the inn parlour, a bottle of wine and an old stained oak table between him and Trip, the horse jockey. The latter personage was a little squat man, about fifty years of age. He was enormously long in the arm, his shoulders hunched, and one eye white. His lips were loose and blue to the centre, the face mottled, and the teeth discoloured. He was generally accounted a fine horseman and also a versatile companion, but for a habit he had acquired of whistling through a hole bored between his two front teeth. Robert liked him for his anecdotes of old prize-fights, and, being himself confessedly a youth, secretly admired his unrivalled capacity for swallowing strong liquor.

"What is a man to do in this cursed town?" inquired Robert, snatching lazily at a fly that buzzed on the window.

"If I was as rich as you are, Mr. Trayner, there's not many things as I couldn't do."

"Rich, Trip! Who says I'm rich?"

"Everybody, Mr. Trayner. There's few people in this town that haven't remarked you, Mr. Trayner."

"Dear me, Trip! Have they, really?"

"Really."

"And they say I'm rich?"

"All of 'em."

"But I'm not rich, my man. I'm very poor."

Trip winked his seeing eye in token of astute comprehension.

"I know, Mr. Trayner, I know. Poor you may be, according to your deserts, poor but honest——"

"Honest! I hope so, my man."

"Poor, but honest, as I was about to say, Mr. Trayner, but no man spends his money more free."

"That's because I have none."

"You're joking, Mr. Trayner."

"No, Trip, I'm not. It's the nature of poor men to spend and rich men to save."

"Bad luck to 'em. The earth was made for us all, Mr. Trayner, and if I had my way, humanity should plant the flag o' liberty. Liberty, Mr. Trayner, that's the word."

"That's the word, Trip; but I'm too sick at heart for politics this morning."

"You're not ill, are you, Mr. Trayner?"

Trip leant anxiously across the table. Robert was touched at such solicitude for his well being. He shook his head.

"It's this town that's killing me, Trip," said he, rapping the table. "What on earth's a man to do? How am I to get rid of the time on my hands?"

Trip solemnly removed the wine-bottle from the table.

"A game with the cards," he suggested; "for a man with a sporting turn of mind, there's nothing to cheer an honest heart like a game with the cards."

Robert made a wild dive at the fly, still buzzing with obstinate good humour on the window-pane.

"No, by God!" he cried, springing up from his

chair, "no games with the cards this day. I'm about as sick of them as I am—as I am of myself."

He fell to pacing the little parlour whilst Trip replaced the bottle of wine and replenished two glasses. He nodded to Robert and tossed off his portion, again filled the glass and maintained silence, for, as Mr. Trayner seemed to be in high ill-temper to-day, he judged it wise not to force the conversation. Robert was experiencing one of those moments of gusty *ennui* which are the portions of young men who possess inordinate and lively imaginations; young men who have fed their souls on the wind and are disposed to become unruly when temporarily becalmed in breezeless interludes. Robert longed for the sensuous joy of being blown about the world, of feeling the rush of blustering gales sweep over his body; he longed for the vagrant delight of being impelled here and there on hazardous errands of no consequence, of being knocked down by a sudden swell, and stumbling forward again in the wind's way, and he resented the present lull in his life's affairs. What was a man to do in a cursed town that lay secure from all hurricane beneath the shelter of deep-breasted hills? As he paced the private parlour of the inn, with his hands stuck into the armpits of his flowered waistcoat, kicking the sawdust into yellow clouds and anathematising the portrait of the landlord's grandfather because it hung crooked upon the wall, he consigned the world and all thereto pertaining to devildom and chaos. What was a man to do?

Trip's curious eye watched him, and the jockey decided that the wine which he had assisted Mr. Trayner to consume on the previous night had been new and of sour savour. He felt no ill effects himself, but then his age and long usage had rendered

him secure from all stomachic revolts. But a poor young innocent like Mr. Trayner! Why, he had a good mind to punch John Meff's head for having ever conceived the idea of putting such mud-water before a gentleman whose most amiable quality was a free hand dipped into a generous pocket. Trip made no doubt that the immediate cause of Robert's disorder was last night's wine, for the old fellow had, with a cunning intuition, cut straight through the lumbering circumlocution of wiser men and had divined that the devil is a term synonymous with what we now call dyspepsia.

"You're ill, Mr. Trayner," said he, in a tone that admitted of no contradiction.

"I tell you I'm not, Trip."

"I know better, Mr. Trayner."

"Nonsense, I'm as well as a man can be."

"But a man who is healthy is contented, Mr. Trayner."

"Contented, did you say?"

"Contented, I did say."

"That's where you're wrong, Trip."

"I should like to learn how, Mr. Trayner."

"I'll tell you. A man who was weak would find this town a paradise."

"A what, Mr. Trayner?"

"An elysium, Trip."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Trayner."

"I mean a comfortable crib, Trip."

"But why should a man, because he's weak, find this town a comfortable crib?"

"Because he could rest here. He would be contented to rest. I can't rest."

"You can't rest, Mr. Trayner?"

"No, Trip."

"A bad sleeper?"

"Shocking. I can't rest at all. I tell you I'm too healthy."

"What?"

"Too healthy. I'm too full of life. I want bleeding."

"I said you were ill," said Trip, once more replenishing his glass on the strength of having established his point in the argument. "A man who wants bleeding is ill."

Robert laughed.

"Well, don't run for a surgeon. It's not that sort of bleeding that I want."

"What do you want, then?"

"I want life and action and excitement."

"Ah, I'm in the boat with you there."

"That's what I want, my man, life and action and excitement. If I had been born a Frenchman, I should have been a great man."

"There's no doubt as you would have been, Mr. Trayner. But why not now? Why not in England? Be the first to plant the flag of liberty. . . ."

"Nonsense."

"Why nonsense, Mr. Trayner? I speak seriously."

"No doubt you do, my good fellow; but the flag of liberty would not fly a day here."

"The slaves would rise, if the way was only shown to 'em, Mr. Trayner."

"Never! . . . But enough of liberty, Trip. . . . I'm not thinking of that. . . . My quarrel is with myself."

"A dangerous customer to put 'em up with, I should say."

"Of course, Trip, of course."

"You know the ropes, I should fancy."

"Just a little bit, my man."

"Game too, I'll warrant?"

"I dare say I could hold my own if it ever came to a scuffle, Trip. But I'm not proposing to smash my own face."

"No, no."

"I'm not worthy to fight with, Trip. I'm disgusted at myself."

"Well, I shouldn't grumble because last night's wine don't taste as sweet this morning. I've known many a young gentleman as——"

"It's not the wine. I'm not grumbling at myself because I'm not a drunkard. I'm disgusted at myself because . . . because . . . because I feel as I do."

"I'm fogged a bit, Mr. Trayner."

"I'll explain. I've learnt a lot, Trip, in the first place."

"No doubt of it, Mr. Trayner."

"And read a lot."

"That's plain to them that ain't scholars."

"Well, having learnt a lot and read a lot, I ought to be able to fall back on myself. I ought to make a friend of my mind. I ought to be contented in reflections."

"But you're not?"

"No, I'm not. I must be up and doing, or I shall cut my throat before I shake the dust of this cursed town from my heels."

"There'd be no shaking the dust then, Mr. Trayner."

"When?"

"If you were to cut your throat."

"No, I suppose not. But come, Trip, no more talking. Swallow that wine . . . button your coat . . . pull yourself together, man . . . find me something to do—something that won't be easy."

Trip drained the dregs of the bottle, buttoned his coat, in dutiful obedience to Mr. Trayner's command, and got up grinning broadly.

"I've got it," said he.

"You have! God bless you! What have you got?"

"The surgeon who's going to bleed you, Mr. Trayner."

The sly twinkle in Trip's expressive optic told Robert that the physician he proposed to summon was of no ordinary character.

"Fetch him in, Trip, fetch him in. I'm at my last gasp already."

"I don't think we'll bring him in here, Mr. Trayner. He's not used to parlour manners."

"Well, we'll go to him, then."

"I'd better go first, Mr. Trayner. He's somewhat nervous of strangers, and he might not take kindly to you, if you took him by surprise."

"I'm interested, Trip, already. What sort of gentleman is this physician?"

"Oh, he thinks a lot of himself, like most o'them do."

"When shall I see him?"

"In five minutes' time, Mr. Trayner."

"And where, Trip? Where?"

"Outside in the yard."

"In the yard!"

"Yes, I'll bring you together. He knows me well, and I'm sure he'll think you're a very respectable character when he sees we're acquainted."

"Go along, Trip, then. Find the surgeon, and I'll meet you in five minutes' time in the yard."

"You won't be frightened of him?"

Robert's eyes glittered.

"I'd face the devil to-day," he said, with an impetuous swagger.

"It's not the devil. Only a relation of his, Mr. Trayner—a sort o' first cousin on the mother's side."

Trip had now reached the door. As he sidled from the room, with that peculiar crooked gait of his that had earned him many a jest and cuff in former days, he turned, winked at Robert, and held up the forefinger of his right hand in token of strict secrecy.

"You won't be afraid o' him?" he asked again.

"Bring him along and I'll show you."

Trip gave a little hoarse chuckle and a loud smack of the lips and departed.

"He seems to expect amusement," thought Robert. "Fine old fellow, Trip! Fine old fellow, very!"

He took two or three impatient turns up and down the parlour, looked at the empty wine-bottle, settled the sit of his coat collar, considered his keen, pleasant complexioned features in the glass, pulled down the corners of his mouth, made a grimace, swung out his watch and found that three and a half minutes had already elapsed since Trip went out into the yard.

"Oh, Lord! I can't wait any longer. Why, something must be wrong with the watch. I wonder what Trip's game is? I think I'll go and see."

He clapped on his hat and strode out from the parlour whistling a lively tune. Passing out towards the yard he met John Meff, the landlord, a short, square-built individual, with yellow hair and red pouchy cheeks. John had a pair of light, sleepy blue eyes and a thin, pointed nose. His face always reminded Robert of a happy sundial.

"John," said he, tapping the landlord on the

back, in the intimate manner that earned him many friends, "John, come out with me into the yard."

"Why, Mr. Trayner?" asked John, without a suspicion of interest in his lazy blue eyes.

"Because I'm going to be bled."

"Going to be bled, Mr. Trayner! Ah, you must have your joke."

"No joke, John. I'm ill, and I'm going to be bled."

"And pray who's going to bleed you?"

"That I don't know myself, John, yet. He's waiting for me in the yard."

John Meff's red cherub cheeks creased in a smile.

"You must be of a strange turn o' mind, Mr. Trayner, to be bled in the yard," said he.

"I am of a strange turn of mind, John, A very strange turn of mind, indeed."

"Is your sickness serious, sir?"

"One of the worst sicknesses that can befall mortal man, John."

"But you're looking well enough."

"So I am, John. That's where the sickness comes in. I am suffering from excess of vitality . . . too much health, John. . . . Little Trip has promised to tame my blood, and get rid of some of this energy . . . this energy, John."

He smacked John Meff smartly on his square shoulders and sent him spinning against the wall. They had now reached the inn yard, where a couple of stable-boys were busy mending the broken axle of a market cart, whilst a small group of waggoners drank their ale and argued on the degrees of stupidity manifested by the two boys and stable-hands employed at inns in general. A few yards farther on to the left Robert saw Trip holding the head-ostler,

whose grey jaws were agrin from ear to ear, in close conversation. Another ostler was exercising a horse, another slushing the wheels of a post-chaise. The scene was animated and cheerful, but nowhere could Robert discern a vestige of the redoubtable physician who was prepared to bleed him of extraneous vitality. He stared round the yard, and John Meff stared too, wondering vaguely whether his guest had already taken on board a superabundance of his most excellent liquors that, despite the anathemas of Trip, had lent world-wide distinction to his house.

"Halloo, Trip, halloo!" called out Robert, stepping out into the yard.

Trip turned to the ostler who was exercising the horse and beckoned him forward.

"Here's the surgeon," cried Trip, pointing to the horse, "and the finest in the world, I'll warrant."

"What! You want me to ride the horse! Is that all? So the matter explodes: the mystery is ended. Upon my word, Trip, you've made a great fuss over nothing."

"Not me, Mr. Trayner."

"What! Do you think I can't ride the animal, my man? Find me a bit of cattle I can't manage, and I'll give you a guinea."

"I won't say as you can't manage it, Mr. Trayner," said Trip, cautiously; "but what I do say is, that if you can, there's not another in this town that can stick on her back."

"A mare?"

"A mare, Mr. Trayner."

Robert eyed the mare more narrowly. She was a fine specimen of the equine race, her grey coat smooth and glossed, and her rather small head splendidly curved at nape and nostril. She stood

something between fifteen and sixteen hands high; of mighty girth; the back broad, the chest square, and the shoulders knit with muscular strength.

"A fine animal," said Robert; "one of the best of her tribe, I'll swear."

He was about to stoop down to examine the mare's knees when John Meff, the colour gone out of his pink cheeks, hastily interposed. Much to Robert's surprise, John caught him by the arm and dragged him out of striking distance from the mare's hind legs.

"Be careful, Mr. Trayner, I beg of you be careful," said he; "you don't know what that mare is. Trip had no right to ever bring her out to you."

Robert was nettled at John Meff's evident anxiety. Pooh! did the fellow think that he was not able to stick in a saddle? Did he fancy for one moment that his guest was not competent to ride a horse of high mettle? It was most aggravating of John to act in so foolish a manner, though, no doubt, his intentions were of the best. Still it cast an aspersion upon his (Mr. Trayner's) character, in the presence of a crowd of grinning ostlers, stable-boys, and straw-chewing waggoners. He was surprised at John, having always given him credit for greater sensibility.

"Nonsense, John," said he, releasing his arm from the landlord's grasp and buttoning his coat, "Trip was acting under my instructions. . . . Trip, I'll try your physician. . . . If she throws me, there's a guinea for you. . . . Come, stand away there."

The head-ostler looked inquiringly at his master. the landlord, a somewhat dubious expression on his furrowed countenance; but, before he had time to turn his head again, Robert was in the saddle and the mare's forelegs pawing at the air. The mare

snorted and lashed out freely, scattering the waggoners to right and left. Robert's knees clutched her sides. She bucked, but Robert remained immovable. Every plan for the discomfiture of an unwary rider known to the equine brain was put into practice, but Robert was not thrown. The two fought it out fiercely in the inn yard for the best part of an hour, whilst the crowd cheered horse and man. Finally they went galloping out into the open road, Robert very white and with set jaws, but the mare reeking, foam-bespattered, and conquered. Away went the two, firm friends now for ever, helter skelter, at break-neck speed, scattering pebbles and raising clouds of dust, down the open road and out into the High Street. There, in the general excitement, a young woman, crossing from the one side to the other, was so transfixed with horror at sight of steed and rider, looming enormous, menacing, that she stood still in the centre of the road and screamed. By a hair's breadth Robert, his arms almost tugged out of their sockets, diverted the mare's course by a fraction that saved the young woman from any worse hurt than a rush of cold wind and a torn shawl. Neighbourly hands rushed to her support, and she was by them carried, although she had not fallen, in the first place, into a ribbon-shop. The young woman was Miss Emma Wardale. By the time she reached the shop, Robert, now powerless to pull in the horse, sweating with fright and excitement, had careered to the other end of the High Street. From here he was taken to the outskirts of the town, and as he had seen the young woman to be in no way hurt, and very wisely judged the best course to pursue was to let the mare gradually expend her energies, he gave her free rein. After all, Trip's physician had proved

a famous fellow, and Robert resigned himself, heart and soul, to the enjoyment of the wild ride. His pulses kept time to the mare's hoofs, the generous currents of his young blood flowed in rapturous freedom; he felt energised in every fibre, and laughed joyously at the scamper and frolic of the mad riot. Two hours later he rode the mare back into the yard of John Meff's inn, horse and rider in a splendid reek and sobered. The waggoners had gone, but every one attached to the inn conspired to give Robert a royal welcome. The quivering mare was led to her stable by Trip, who declared, tears in his eyes, that he thanked the almighty powers of heaven that he had lived to see such a day.

"Do you feel sore, Mr. Trayner," inquired John Meff, amidst a hubbub of congratulations.

"Not a bit, John, not a bit," answered Robert who ached in every limb.

The young gallant strode high through the admiring throng, took a pint of good brown ale from Trip's trembling hands, and drained it at a draught. All who liked might drink at Mr. Trayner's expense. He liked playing Squire Bountiful, and felt proud, and for the moment, happy. Certainly the town was dull, but life here was preferable to a desk in his uncle's office in Cheapside. Without doubt, Uncle William was one of the kindest and best of men; but a high-blooded young man resents dependence. Besides, at Cheapside one was obliged to assume an irksome show of respect for business; whilst here, (although it was Uncle William's money that flowed so freely), a man of spirit was received more at his proper value, was even looked up to in admiration and esteem.

Robert strolled into the little private parlour

which he had engaged from John Meff, and despatched Trip to the ribbon-shop to prosecute inquiries as to the health of the young woman so inadvertently scared by his horsemanship. But he had no concern for her apart from an interest dictated by a naturally chivalrous disposition. Trip returned in due course to relate that Miss Emma Wardale—that was the young woman's name—had suffered a severe shock and was confined to her bed. She sent word to the gentleman that she freely exonerated him from all blame in the matter, and thanked him for his kind inquiries.

III

A YOUNG MAN WITH DREAMS

THE first glint of sunlight that drove through Robert's bedroom window-curtains found him up, and shaving in cold water by the light of two candles that flickered squalidly in the sudden whiteness of the dawn. Robert, drawing aside his drab-coloured curtains, threw open the windows and saw the morning break fresh and clear. He looked down on the old town and saw it for the first time beautiful; its sweet archaic towers and glimmering spires dawn flushed and roseate, whilst sloping upward from the further margin of the high street, the green-bosomed hills were alive and keen with song, and the smell of blossomed earth. At such moments as this Robert was always an optimist, always flamed with the zest and colour of life, his thoughts and humour taking size and shape from the glow of nature's golden phenomena. He laughed happily in remembrance of his wrestle with the grey mare, and once more the fine sweat of the ride broke out on his temples. His bones ached somewhat, and experiencing a certain stiffness in the leg, he determined to indulge in a smart walk to the edge of the town and back again, just to ease the sinews and stimulate an appetite for John Meff's rolls and eggs, and fresh farm butter. He snatched up his stick and swaggered out into the inn yard, where a couple of ostlers

were engaged in sluicing themselves beneath the pump.

"Fine morning, Mr. Trayner," cried out the elder, flicking a towel round his ears and neck.

"Grand morning, my man. How's the mare?"

"Tame as a lamb, sir. You've mastered her, Mr. Trayner, and taken the devil out of her temper, which can't be said of no other man as I've known."

"She's a fine mare, my man, and I've a good mind to offer John a decent sum for her. Good morning."

Robert departed from the yard in slow dignity, as befitted a man of such "game" parts. His performance of yesterday on the mare had inspired for him in the heart of ostler and stable-boy an almost reverent adulation, and he liked them, as he liked every one whom he impressed, and only wished he had a guinea to fling to every worker engaged in the stable-yard. He paused on the open road and took a deep breath, drinking into his lungs the poignant freshness of morning air. Then he sighed over the sweetness of the draught, and walked bravely up the high street. Hardly a person was stirring in the town; all the shops were as yet unopened, and no one shared his walk but a mangy cur, who trotted in front of him on three legs, and yelped up into his face. Robert at once determined to take the dog into his keeping, provide it with a home, and prevail upon a surgeon to dress its wounded leg. The dog would probably be his faithful servitor until death, and upon some hazardous occasion might even repay kindness by preserving his benefactor's life through the exhibition of remarkable canine ingenuity. As Robert thought of this he loved the dog, and whistled to him affectionately. He was quite intoxicated with

the morning. He walked a little way out of the town, halting finally on a slight eminence of thick tangled gorse and undergrowth, all dewy and glistening with wet pearls. Every time he moved he felt the good hard sound of snapping twigs, and the homely smell of green earth came up into his nostrils and mellowed the strong currents of his blood. Now and again he caught the frailer perfume of young flowers, whilst the soft warbling of those silver-throated songsters that peopled the tree branches sobbed at his heart in a pure paean of eternal youth. He gripped hard on his stout oak stick, and his front teeth clenched, so that he might not shout aloud in absurd manner, being crazed by the vital sweetness of waking life. He could not return to the inn yet; he must drive further forward into the morning. And so forgetting his dainty, high-street strut, his fine cambrics, and critical stare, the result of so much study and observation in "the town," the true Robert Trayner began to run and leap like an urchin, hallooing wildly as he sped down the farther side of the little eminence and on through wooded patch and glade and echoing hollow. He sped this way and that way, threading with glad inconsequence the mazy alcoves of laughing woods, until at last he pulled up quite spent and gasping for breath. He had struck deep into the forests, and was far from the high-roads. He was a solitary worshipper in arbourous solitude; alone in green sanctuary; and he made obeisance. Here and there pale shafts of sunlight crept through swinging foliage and wove bright patterns on dense tufts of sedgy sward. Robert leant against a tree, drew breath and fanned his flushed cheeks with his broad-brimmed hat. His ecstasy in no way relaxed, and as he struggled for

breath he seemed to pant into the morning; to be confused in body and sense with the sunlight and dew, the earth and all its varied growths and products.

The moment was immense. He seemed to have crept suddenly into Nature's breast, and there to have learnt secrets that pass all common telling. He felt in close kinship with all things created. He was profoundly moved, for his mood was veering from exultant rapture to a gorgeous quietude that admitted of gentle tears. He felt stirred by vague and delightful apprehension, as one exploring into realms of fairy mystery. He grew expectant, even timid, conscious of his own footfall and the least rustle of a leaf. Presently he came to a lilied pool, a tiny basin, hedged by reedy greenness and filled with dim water. Here he flung himself upon the bank and mused in the obvious fashion of his period. But to-day his thoughts halted, and he resolved that the occasion was one for verse. He plucked idly at a heavy fledged bough drooping above his head, and strove to absorb the verdant coolness of the scene. He wished to express the woodland denseness with its occasional shafts of orient splendour. Verses tripped on to his tongue, but he was dissatisfied. Phyllis and Corydon and other items of the pastoral stock-in-trade were weighed in a nice balance and found wanting. Somehow or other they would not harmonize into their environment. Phyllis' petticoats would be positively indecent. He wanted a denuded Phyllis, glimmering in pale moonshine beauty. A naked creature of the woods; forest-grown, dew-nurtured; expressive in her person of all the beauty and the tragedy of woodland worlds; immemorial and mysterious. He had never made the acquaintance of any such person in verse of his reading, and

he felt, should he introduce her to the polite world, such an innovation would be regarded as an impropriety. Robert reproached himself. . . . Dear, dear, here was an unhealthy thought to be engendered by such a morning! His conceptions were not pure. Surely there was no need for so wild a figure as he had imagined to humanize a scene of such intrinsic loveliness. He should be content in the foliage, the flowers brimmed by dainty moisture, the chaste throbbing of the birds, and Aurora's golden blushes! . . . And yet his mind was centred on his dream maid, and her absence destroyed his calm, irritated him against his better reason, and, finally, drove him home to the town in moody disgust. . . . The streets were alive now, the shutters down from the shop windows and the boys whistling. He counted no less than three bombazine gowns. What a stale, flat, ugly little town, to be sure! The thought of the forest girl, who ought to have been asleep in a grassy hollow, or bathing in the pool of dim water, was enough to sicken a man eternally of bombazine. And as for sarsenet parasols . . .! He strode angrily into the inn yard, nodded distantly to Trip and his companions, and found his way into his little parlour and called for breakfast. When it was laid smoking hot before him, he suddenly jumped up from his chair, ran out again into the yard and whistled. He stared up and down the open road and whistled still louder.

"The devil!" he cried in vexation, "I've lost the dog who was to be my friend for life."

Again he consigned all the world and its ways to devildom and chaos. The morning mood was dissipated and he returned to his breakfast; freely acknowledging that he was, without cause, a most

ungracious and irritable young man. There could be no doubt that he was smitten by some dread distemper of the mind. He was constantly at variance with himself. Nothing could compel his interest for long, nothing could afford him abiding pleasure. Somewhere he possessed an aching void.

He consumed his breakfast with a perfunctory admission that—as landlords went—John Meff was a decent enough personage. Trip put his head through the door and inquired whether he would like another ride on the mare.

"No; I feel worse than ever this morning, Trip."

"A good stiff ride, Mr. Trayner."

"No use, Trip. The mare's done all she can for me. She's exhausted her skill. I mastered her, and I'm sick of her already."

"She's as fresh as a daisy this morning, Mr. Trayner."

"I'm not saying she isn't, Trip. That's enough. I'll call for you when I want you."

Trip retired to the obscurity of the stables. Mr. Trayner did not seem to be in the humour to stand a bottle of wine, so he contrived to be tolerably happy over a mug of ale in the company of the head-ostler. Mr. Trayner himself walked leisurely in the direction of Miss Emma Wardale's, for the purpose of making further inquiries as to that young lady's condition. He owned a mild interest in the matter, albeit he had no sexual vices, but in such a town one must be thankful for a small measure of excitement. After all, the forest girl was exactly as he had conceived her, pure moonshine. She could never be materialized into anything but a delusive aspiration, and so she had better be speedily forgotten for his mind's contentment. It would not do to continue through one's

life at utter and irreconcilable enmity with bombazine and sarsenet parasols. It would be ungallant to women, whom he had always been instructed by Uncle William to venerate and love impersonally.

So he swung open the door of the ribbon-shop and stooping, so as not to knock his head against the topmost portion of its wooden frame, entered into the quiet lights of that establishment, and saw for the first time in his life the frightened eyes of Mave.

He bore himself very well under the circumstances, and managed to grope his way to the counter without any theatrical ejaculations or sudden staggerings back against the door. His eyes were wide opened and eager, his square jaws set firmly, but the handsome colour quite gone from his cheeks. He felt a trembling that travelled in nervous currents to the tips of his fingers, and his heart palpitated.

Mave, one frail hand buried in a basket and the other clutching primitively at her breast, stood fixed in absolute terror. She had thought so much of Mr. Trayner, had so magnified his importance, and, lying at night in her garret bed, had built upon him such imaginary magnificence and irreproachable grandeur, that at this moment of intimate meeting, her limbs shook beneath her and her heart strained against her bosom. . . . Robert heard himself speaking and the voice sounded commonplace enough, if detached and distant.

"I am Mr. Trayner," said he, "the gentleman whose horse so frightened Miss Wardale yesterday. I deeply regret the occurrence."

"Yes, sir."

"And how is she this morning?"

"Miss Wardale, sir?"

"Yes, Miss Wardale."

"She is not quite herself yet, sir. She is still abed."

The voice had a low tremor, a compelling undertone of tears, that made his very heart-strings vibrate uneasily.

"Word was brought me last night that she was quite prostrate."

"Yes, it was true."

"She was not seriously shaken, I hope?"

"She has been frightened; you have frightened her, sir."

"You distress me. I don't think she was really hurt, though, but, of course a timid girl will——"

"Miss Wardale is not a timid girl, sir."

"Not timid?"

"Oh no."

"What then, child?"

"Miss Wardale is very bold."

"Bold, indeed! Well, I'm very glad to hear it. She will recover all the sooner."

"I don't think so, sir."

"You don't think so!"

"No."

"But why?"

"Miss Wardale likes being ill."

"Likes being ill, child! How very extraordinary! What makes you think so?"

"I know it."

"But how?"

"She told me so herself only this morning."

"She must have a queer turn of mind."

"Miss Wardale says it's interesting."

"What is interesting? Really, I'm very dull."

"You are rather, sir. Why, interesting to be ill."

Robert dropped into a chair, crossed his legs and

put his hat and cane on the counter. He wanted a moment to consider the miracle in all its thousand and one varied aspects. To dream was no uncommon thing; but to realize one's imagination's "dear deceits," to behold the dream, the vague conception, materialized and even beautified, was nothing short of miraculous. He was not naturally superstitious, but felt almost afraid.

Mave had not moved an inch since he had entered the shop. One hand was still in the basket, the other still at her breast. Her lips were just parted, and her eyes, womanhood waking in their depths, were wide open. She watched Robert's movements with a rather poor curiosity, in the manner of a street urchin who is deeply moved to behold an Emperor as capable of jerking his arms as an ordinary mortal. Mave endeavoured to find some momentous reason for his resting in the chair, and remembering that her tongue had betrayed her into admitting that he was "rather dull," wondered if his intention was to report this impertinence to Miss Wardale.

"Shall I tell Miss Wardale that you are waiting to see her?" she asked, unconsciously answering her own thoughts.

"Shall you tell Miss Wardale that I am waiting to see her! Who told you that I am waiting to see her?"

"Nobody, sir, but I thought you might be."

"In other words, you thought me a great nuisance and contrived a pretty little plan for getting me out of the shop."

He did not regard her in the fashion of a quiz, but, with a semblance of real anxiety, as though his comfort did depend upon his knowing whether she

desired his company. Mave moved now, fell back from the counter, her eyes troubled and her hands clenched in positive denial.

"Oh, sir! No, I never had such a thought—I never had—never."

"You are sure, child?"

"Never."

"Well, I'm afraid I am rather a nuisance."

"Oh, don't talk to me like that please! You must think me wicked."

"No; I think you are very good."

"I do try to be a good girl. I do—always."

"I am sure you do."

Robert had lost much of his customary vivacity and his cheerful address was gone. He sat for some considerable time observing Mave, and, strangely enough for her, his steady gaze in no way abashed her. At last he flushed up, remembering that his conduct must seem outrageous and absurd, and, being a young man, he was very sensitive of exciting ridicule. So he snatched up his hat and cane and bade Mave a hasty adieu. The glare of the sunshine outside the shop dazzled him and he almost reeled.

IV

THE VISION REALIZED

IN the afternoon he was back again, carefully attired in a new coat and waistcoat. This time Mave was positively frightened at his appearance. There could be no doubt now that his intention was to report her incivility of the morning to Miss Wardale at the earliest opportunity. There could be no other possible explanation of his return to the shop. She had been chiding herself all day for a slip of the tongue that admitted him to be "rather dull." What a thing to say to a customer! and such a regal customer too, although he had spent nothing but fair words. And yet was she not at heart glad to see him?

The regal customer appeared in good humour, albeit somewhat grave. He at once reverted to his old position, lounging in the chair by the counter. He seemed rather sad.

"Get me some ribbons, child," said he, with an airy wave of the hand.

"Some ribbons, sir?"

"Yes, if you please."

"What sort, sir?"

"Any sort."

"Any sort!"

"Yes. Just bring me those baskets over there."

She did his bidding in great wonderment, and he

dipped his hand into one of the baskets, pulled out a bunch of ribbons, and spread them on the counter.

"Now we have an excuse for conversation," said he, and smiled.

How strange was his conduct! But his eyes were the kindliest she had ever seen.

"Do you know why I have come here this afternoon?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Can't you guess?"

"I—have an idea."

"An idea! Let me hear it."

"You have something to tell Miss Wardale. You have something to tell her about me."

"Good gracious! You mystify me."

Mave leant towards him in an attitude of pleading. He could see that she was troubled, and when she spoke it was almost in a whisper, in a tone entreating secrecy.

"Oh, I know I was rude to you, sir, this morning. Indeed, I know I was very impertinent. But it was not meant, sir—I did not know what I was saying."

"Child, explain yourself. You look frightened."

"Oh, you won't tell Miss Wardale, will you?"

"Tell her what, child? Please explain. Don't look so troubled. Explain what's the matter."

"You won't tell her, will you, that you thought I wanted you out of the shop, and that I said you were rather dull. You won't tell her, will you? I am very sorry. I did not mean it."

He was touched to a certain tremulous compassion. After all, she was a very little girl. He leant over the counter and clasped her hand, but dropped it again almost immediately. He had meant to be

simply compassionate, had wished merely to allay her absurd terrors, but her touch thrilled him.

"My—my good child, you are running off like a wild thing after all sorts of imaginative follies. Don't be afraid of me, don't think that I could harm you in any way. I don't want to see Miss Emma Wardale, I don't want to tell her anything."

Mave looked genuinely relieved. "Thank you; thank you so much."

"Don't thank me until I have done you some favour."

"Very well, sir."

"Now, what on earth put the thought of my seeing Miss Wardale into your head?"

"I wondered why you had returned."

"Oh, I see, but my dearest child, how could I possibly see Miss Wardale when she is ill and abed?"

"Oh, but she would get up if she knew you were here, sir."

"The devil! I mean what makes you think that?"

"Because she is so fond of you, sir."

Robert gazed at her in blank astonishment.

"Miss Wardale is fond of me! . . . Child, we are all at sixes and sevens. . . . Miss Wardale does not even know me."

Mave shook her head, and a black wavy tress fell down from its ribbons on to her neck.

"She does know you, sir."

"I assure you no. I have never set eyes upon her until the time of that unfortunate occurrence yesterday."

"I did not say you had, sir. But she has seen you."

"Where?"

"Here."

"Here!"

"Through the window she sees you out walking."

"And you?"

"And—and—me!"

"Have you seen me through the window?"

"Oh, of course, often, sir."

"I am glad—very—very glad, because—because I—er—hope we shall be—well, friends."

"We!—Miss Wardale?"

"You; not Miss Wardale. I want you for my friend."

She took in a deep breath, drew the ecstasy of the moment down into her bosom, and made a slight curtsey, gazing stedfastly into his face with brimming eyes.

"Thank you—thank you—so much—thank you, sir, for—all your goodness."

Once more he leant forward and clasped her hand. His face was full of gravity, and he pressed her warm fingers with tense grip.

"You are glad? You will accept me as a friend?"

Mave was tempest-taken by his ardour, the suggestion of manful courtesy. The grey, chilly shop seemed fragrant and warm.

"Oh, if you only knew how I wanted a friend—Mr.—Mr.—Trayner! I would—would give anything for a friend—a friend to be close to me in every thing."

"You have Miss Wardale."

"No, no—don't think that; she is not a friend. She does not even like me."

"Does not like you?"

"She hates me, I think, sometimes."

"She is not cruel to you?"

Mave's mournful lips did not answer.

"Great Heavens! She is not cruel to you?"

"She—she talks to me a great deal about you."

"About me, child?"

"Yes—oh, often—but she always gets angry with me."

"Angry! What for?"

"I can't say, sir."

"'Mr. Trayner,' if you please."

"I can't say, Mr. Trayner."

"Can't say 'Mr. Trayner!' Why, you've just said it."

"I mean—I meant that I can't say why Miss Wardale gets angry with me when we talk about you."

Robert burst into happy laughter. In an instant he saw fear darken Mave's eyes again, and she would have actually wrenched away her hand had he not held it fast, grateful for its soft moisture.

"No, no, child. Why, did you really think I could laugh at you. I was not laughing at you; I couldn't laugh at you, child."

"What made you laugh then?"

"Why, the absurd way we mistook each other."

Mave glanced at him nervously, searched his eager face like a child examining a new benefactor. She grew calm and trustful.

"No, no, I don't think you would laugh at me," she said slowly, as though every word was the laboured fruit of mature deliberation.

"We are friends then?"

"Oh yes—that is—if you will it."

"It is for you, not for me, to will it."

"For me!"

"Yes, for you. I want you to grant me your friendship. Understand, please, that I am asking you a favour."

"Yes—yes, sir."

"No more 'sirs,' 'Mr. Trayner,' please."

"Yes, Mr. Trayner."

"Well, then, good-bye for the present."

"Good-bye, Mr. Trayner."

"I shall see you soon again."

"Thank you, sir."

"'Mr. Trayner,' please."

"Thank you, Mr. Trayner."

"Well, then, good-bye for the present."

"Good-bye, Mr. Trayner."

"You won't forget me, will you?"

"I shall never forget you—never."

Robert had reached the door and held it open, his hat already on his head, when he hesitated uncertainly and returned. The intensity with which she had unconsciously emphasized her last words recalled him. The wondering gravity with which she watched his every movement was most childlike. It possessed all childhood's heart-seizing appeal to our better parts, and impressed Robert so vitally that he felt, no matter what might befall to him from the lap of futurity, he could never in the smallest degree be worthy of this child-saint's regard.

He leant across the counter. "You seem to find it very difficult, my little friend, to call me 'Mr. Trayner.'"

"It is rather."

"I am not sorry. Never call me by that name again. My proper name is Robert."

Mave was silent and palpitated in confusion.

"My name is Robert—call me Robert, please."

Mave was afraid, but had a great wish to acquiesce. It was so exciting; such a desperate adventure. She glanced furtively round the shop and whispered the name—just faintly syllabled the word with her lips close to his. Her cheeks flushed warmly, and Robert's heart pattered. This touch of mystery, small suggestion of secrecy, made them dearly intimate.

"Thank you, thank you so much. You say it very nicely."

"Do I, Mr. ——"

"'Robert,' please. No more 'misters.'"

"Oh, but I can't keep saying it. Why do you want me to?"

"Do; please do."

"Robert—there, Robert."

Mave uttered his name quite loudly, and gave a shiver of fright. They both laughed softly, and once more his hand touched hers across the counter.

"Now tell me your name."

"My name?"

"Yes; please tell me at once. What is it?"

"Mave."

"What a sweet name! Mave! Oh, what a lovely name!"

They stood in wrapt silence, confronting one another in the quiet lights of that sober shop, at utter loss for words, like people who have accomplished some hazardous enterprise, and who are resting upon the consummation of their endeavours in mutual triumph, eyes smiling, hearts glad. A scene may be momentous not by its actions, its speech or controversy, but by the emotions it engenders, and so Mave and Robert, despite the

absurdity of their dialogue, were thrilled on closing a great passage in their lives. Words! what were words to them? What had words to do with such a meeting? They met; they saw; they understood.

He called again the next morning, purchased a few trifles, and spent a couple of hours. When he arrived in the afternoon they were the oldest friends.

They were alone as before, because Miss Emma Wardale was reluctant to abandon the luxury attendant upon a couch of sickness, but during one penetrating silence a gentleman and his wife called in and bought a supply of coloured wools. Robert, lounging by the counter, and apparently absorbed in the fineries of a heap of cambrics, paid little heed to the customers, but noticed that the gentleman was tall, angular, and extraordinarily thin. His hair was long, lank, and red, his face sunken and grey as ashes and while his lady examined her wools he read a little book, leaning against the door. The two customers passed out together in silence.

"Who is that, Mave my child?" inquired Robert, when they had gone.

"That is Mr. Daniel Deacon and his wife. Mrs. Hallowes, whom I used to live with, Robert, told me that Mr. Deacon had been very good to me when I was a baby."

"My thanks to Mr. Deacon. Do you remember him, Mave?"

"Oh no; but I believe it was through something he said that I ever went to Mrs. Hallowes."

"A strange man to look at, Mave, but I think well meaning," said Robert, looking up into her eyes.

And in that look Mr. Daniel Deacon and all the world were clean forgot. . . . Robert left soon afterwards as a bevy of women customers took possession

of the shop. He walked swiftly through the town, treading air. His life seemed permeated. How beautiful she was! How exact the counterpart of his conception on that morning of ecstasy! That morning mood had demonstrated that he had needed her from the first hour of his manhood. There had been something wanting in him; but now that he had found Mave, he was made whole. They together —yes, yes, the thought of separation was already unendurable—they together would constitute a perfect soul. The confusion of their beings would extinguish the base fumes of mortality. There should be entire self-obliteration in the fruition of most perfect love, in mutual growth and gradual development. . . . But how could this be? He was in no way worthy of her—never could in reason hope to be so, though travelling through an eternity of purifying fires! . . . Oh, but he must strive; he had a will of iron as—as the grey mare could testify; he must strive and dedicate his hours to the task of self-perfection. How wonderfully he had made out her likeness that morning in the woods! How completely had he realized the lineaments of his soul's desire, and in what exact setting had he figured her, dewy and fay-like, in a woodland waste. He felt hot with absurd shame, as though he had pryed upon her actual loveliness. It was difficult to differentiate between the vision and the girl, between the dream and the dream's realization. The girl in the woods had been so tangible; they had almost caressed. . . . It was scandalous to think of Mave in the ribbon-shop; to know that she languished at such utter variance from her true and fitting environment. Why was it that life persisted with so little sense of dramatic propriety? He remembered an awful scene he had had

with his father when they had reached the parting of the ways. The dreadful old man had tottered from his bed, his face glowing with wrath, and it had ended on a blow. What a scene it had been! A scene that should have been conducted under tempestuous conditions to the accompaniment of rush and hurricane. The clouds should have been gathered in ebon density; but there had been no clouds to gather—only a smiling blue sky and a still warm June evening breathing easy perfume. Nature had no sense of environment: that was certain, else she had not allowed him to break in a sweat of anger from his father's rage on an evening of quiet sloth; else she had not driven Mave o' the Woods into a stiff gown and a provincial ribbon-shop. Truly it would seem that God made sometimes mistakes . . . most likely to allow persons of Mr. Robert Trayner's amiable adroitness to exercise their qualities by setting matters straight. Most certainly Mave should be transplanted to her natural home; he would rescue her from the oblivion of dusty trade. She should be filled with morning gladness; she should dabble in dim waters; she should be fulfilled of destiny. She should be at sisterhood with the stars! . . . When Robert had got thus far he found himself in the inn yard.

V

MR. TRAYNER'S GUEST

ROBERT sauntered into his little parlour where Trip was playing "a game with the cards," old Mosely, the attorney, being his antagonist. Mosely was rather a noticeable personage, with a high angular nose, a receding forehead, constantly wrinkled up as in perplexity, and a few scant white hairs, brushed back straight on to his coat-collar. He had a constant smile and a wheezy inquisitive manner of address, which always seemed to imply a question or profess a mild astonishment.

"Where have you been, Mr. Trayner?" he asked, his forehead wrinkled up into lines of anxious inquiry.

"Where have I been, Mosely. Why, in the High Street for a walk."

"I confess I began to think you had given us the go-by."

"Not at all, Mosely, not at all. I've been busy lately; that's why you haven't seen so much of me."

"I trust you don't mind us making free with your parlour?"

"Not at all, Mosely; you're very welcome."

"Will you join us, Mr. Trayner?"

Mr. Mosely made an obsequious gesture towards the cards.

"A game with the cards is always welcome," pleaded Trip.

Robert shook his head, turned away and called to John Meff, who was hovering in the passage, for a bottle of wine. Out of compliment to such liberality Mr. Mosely shovelled the cards into Trip's hands and composed himself for conversation. Candles were brought in with the wine and the curtains drawn across the parlour windows. Mr. Mosely rubbed his hands and glanced round the apartment in inquiring cheerfulness, whilst Trip stirred the fire into a blaze.

"What a snug little party we make, to be sure!" he remarked affably. "Don't you think so, Mr. Trayner?"

"I do, Mosely; and after we've cracked this bottle you shall join me over some supper," answered Robert, who felt that he must squander his benevolent humour on somebody.

Trip and Mosely drew their chairs closer to the fire and discussed the wine, at veritable peace with themselves and all the world.

"I've been buying ribbons, Mosely," suddenly said Robert.

"Have you, Mr. Trayner? Really!"

Conversation in general, up to now, had not flowed with that easy freedom which usually enlivens such scenes of good-fellowship. Trip had pointed his periods with several witty improprieties redolent of the stables, and Mosely had related a good anecdote about a client of his, who made a rise in the world, Tyburn way, in the long ago. But Robert, although smiling, seemed sourly self-centred and detached from a scene in which he cut the principal figure. He sprawled in an attitude of youthful reverie, his hands thrust down deep into his trouser-pockets,

and his long legs toasting before the agreeable blaze and crackle of the fire. A warm glow flickered on his face and he gazed through the fire and smiled at Mave. Supper was served and consumed and a further supply of liquor brought to the table. Mosely and Trip exchanged jests, telling tales against one another, and Robert, taking his cue from Mosely's outbursts of shrill laughter, smiled indulgently over a dozen or so anecdotes which he had not heard. When there was a lull in the conversation Trip glanced from Robert to Mosely and sagely winked his eye.

"Deep in thought, I suppose?" inquired Mosely of the jockey, in a discreet undertone, which remark nevertheless broke in upon Robert's reflections. Thus aroused he made his second contribution to the evening's entertainment.

"I've been buying ribbons, Mosely."

"Have you, Mr. Trayner? Really!"

Robert stirred himself and heard for the first time the constant patter of rain against the windows. He edged his chair nearer the fire.

"Why, it's raining, Trip," he exclaimed.

"And has been for the last hour and a half, Mr. Trayner."

"Dear me, I never noticed it."

"No, Mr. Trayner; didn't you really?"

Robert turned round and fixed Mosely, a new interest in his eye. Here was a man on terms of intimate acquaintanceship with everybody's business. Why not put his reputed knowledge to the test? Why not question him? Information was always useful. Robert devised this conclusion to make an outlet for his thoughts, to enjoy himself by engaging somebody in conversation about Mave.

"Can you guess where I bought my ribbons, Mosely?" he asked, tilting his chair and smiling rather foolishly up at the ceiling.

"Can I guess, Mr. Trayner. Well, that's no hard matter. At Miss Wardale's, of course."

"At Miss Wardale's, you say. No, I don't think so. What sort of person is she, Mosely?"

"Oh, she's bedridden now, Mr. Trayner. It's her niece Emma, who I expect served you."

"Her niece Emma! Why, you seem to know all the family, Mosely. What sort of person is Emma?"

"She's a young woman who might be called handsome by some and not by others."

"Upon my soul, you're very informing. Is she dark?"

"No, Mr. Trayner, fair, with high cheek bones and a rather fine nose."

"I have not seen her, then. "No, I could not have bought my ribbons at Miss Wardale's. Isn't there another shop of the kind in the town?"

"No, Mr. Trayner; but there is another young woman in the shop."

"Ah, perhaps it was she who served me. What sort of person is the—the other young woman?"

Trip by this time was nigh asleep. The conversation, to his thinking, lacked both point and humour. He lent emphasis to the dialogue by an occasional snore. But Mr. Mosely begged leave to take a different and opposite view of the proceedings. Robert's questionings possessed an artless persistence that reminded the man of law of the session house. He conserved his knowledge and threw out feelers to draw the drift of Mr. Trayner's interests.

"What sort of person is the other young woman?

Oh, naught to speak of — a foundling—a gutter creature, Mr. Trayner."

Robert confessed himself at once. Mosely was, he felt, a ruffian and he turned upon him in instant wrath.

"What do you mean, Mosely? What do you know about this girl? Why should you speak of her in such terms? I say, why? Answer me."

"Your pardon, Mr. Trayner. No offence was meant really. For myself I believe her to be a very deserving young person."

Robert was up now and pacing the room. He thought he discerned a slyness in Mosely's glance and he could have struck himself for having been so open in his anger. The inadequacy of Mosely's offence and the wrath it had aroused in his heart was palpably absurd. Still there was no need to dissemble. Mosely, after all, was nothing but a hack attorney of the lowest order. Any fine feelings he might have originally owned must have been long ago merged and confounded in the stench and vileness of session house and prison cell. Poor fellow! how could he know Mave? He was to be pitied rather than hated, and as for his opinion—no, it was not worth that snap of the fingers.

"Tell me all you know about this girl, Mosely—all you know, old grub-hunter," he said, in a slightly more conciliatory manner.

"I will, Mr. Trayner, if it interests you."

"It does interest me, Mosely. Don't be deceitful; you know it—you know she interests me."

"Well, let me see. In the first place, her name is Mave."

"So much I knew already."

"Did you really, Mr. Trayner? Her full name is Mave O'Moran."

"O'Moran, is it?"

"It's supposed to be O'Moran, but we know nothing of her ancestry. Her mother's name was O'Moran. Nan O'Moran was lagged for stealing guineas from one of her gentlemen."

Robert winced. Mosely's inquiring smile cut him like a knife, and his easy, pleasant tone of narration was abominable. It was Mosely who angered him, not poor unfortunate Nan, whom he knew nothing about, but whom he had already vested with a great deal of picturesque and sentimental finery. But Robert's thirst for information curbed his wrath.

"Go on, Mosely," he said, "tell me the entire story."

"Well, when Nan went the way, Mr. Trayner, of many a better man and woman—clients of mine, some of 'em, Mr. Trayner—and was crapt by the Topping cove——"

"Talk English man, for Heaven's sake. I don't understand thieves' cant—talk English."

"I will, Mr. Trayner—I meant only to amuse—Where was I? Oh, I remember, I had got Nan to the gallows."

"The gallows!"

"Yes, she swung, Mr. Trayner, for the trifle o' coin she pinched from her gentleman's breeches."

"My God! And she was her mother!"

"Well, the girl at Miss Wardale's was a child then, not more than five or six, I should say."

"Did she know of her mother's death?"

"Not that I know of, Mr. Trayner. When Nan was lagged, the child was taken in tow by a couple o' her mother's old pals. Fortune, however, did not smile on these ladies. They reached this town and were lagged here themselves for the same sort o'

lay as Nan had practised herself. Mr. Deacon, a magistrate and pious gentleman of these parts——"

"I've seen him, Mosely."

"You have, Mr. Trayner? A good man and a learned one too, I believe. Well, he spoke kindly of the infant, and a Mrs. Hallowes took her into her cottage and kept her there, as a sort of companion drudge, until the old lady died. Then Miss Wardale —the elder Miss Wardale—who was stronger then than she is now, gave the girl house-room. Mrs. Hallowes had been a customer of Miss Wardale's, and that is how, I suppose, she came to know of this Mave O'Moran. She cleaned the pots and pans and worked hard, I should think, for old Miss Wardale seemed to take a liking to her, and finally she appeared in the shop, to the great displeasure of Miss Emma, the niece, when that young lady came back from London."

"And that is her story?"

"Yes, Mr. Trayner; that's her story, so far as I know it."

"And her father?"

"Her what?"

"Her father. She must have had a father. Who was he, Mosely?"

"Well . . . How should we know, Mr. Trayner?"

Mosely smiled.

"Poor little child, poor little Mave," murmured Robert.

Mosely sighed in sympathy, and nodded his head.

"A hard case, Mr. Trayner—a hard case; but, I think, the girl is happy enough now."

"No, no, she's not," answered Robert. "She can't be happy there—in those surroundings, in that old dusty shop. She can't be happy with that woman,

Emma Wardale. Its monstrous that she should be there, poor little child!"

Mosely's brief narration of the unfortunate circumstances attendant on Mave's birth and childhood gripped Robert's heart and agonized him. It was so easy for a youth with an imaginative gift to supply the story with details. He could hear the horrid laughter in "the boozing ken." He could see the wolvish eyes and cruel lips of the grotesque men as they slobbered obscenities to their companions. The stench of the place reeked in his nostrils, and he shuddered, so that Mosely wondered if he had caught a fever, and was seized by sudden chills. He passed with a horde of gibbering ghosts into loathsome cellars, and lay with them, nothing but rotting straw between his body and river ooze; he followed them into filthy garrets, Bridewell, prison cells; he accompanied them through all the dreadful cycles of their infernal miseries, because in the centre of these spectre travellers was Mave. . . . He understood now why he loved her, why the sight and touch of her had discovered within his soul troubled depths that he himself before had never fathomed. He began to see why, on looking into her eyes, he had learnt that to express one's soul suffering must be touched with gentle hands, and why, he then knew for the first time, that of all the human passions, pain is the only one divine.

As he paced the inn parlour Robert heard, dimly, a drenching rain, swirled by the wind across the yard and against the rattling windows. Trip still snored. Mosley had pulled some papers from his pocket, and was reading with the most precise intensity. The grey rhythm of the rain beat time to Robert's thoughts.

Robert considered the chronicle of Mave's birth, parentage, and childhood, as it had come to him from

the lips of Mosely. It was pitiable; it was sublime It seemed to him almost a parable, illustrating the Divine method, if not the Divine intention. Mave, the most beautiful, the most spiritually glamoured object his eyes had ever beheld, had been bred and nurtured in stagnant slime and vile corruption. And was it not from such sources that all loveliness was bred and nurtured to spring finality, like the flowers, drawing natal sustenance from the filth of the fields, the bones and the bowels of those who lie in graves, into a sudden and a starry glory? To the flowers Man, through the medium of his delighted senses, made obeisance, and to Mave, their poor sister, would Robert make deep obeisance out of the fulness of his heart and his divining perception.

Having thought so much, Robert was quite happy. The clouds cleared from his brows, and his eyes relaxed from their dream intensity. He had thoroughly justified to himself his relationship towards Mave. The thought and feeling expended upon her, he had assured himself, was wine spilt upon a worthy altar. He was quite happy, having postponed all consideration of his future line of conduct in the matter.

"Let's have another bottle o', wine, Mr. Trayner," said Mosely, "at my expense this time, though."

By instinct, rather than hearing, Trip awoke, rubbed his eyes, and gazed round the parlour with sleepy stupidity.

"Yes, we will have another bottle, Mosely, but I must pay," said Robert, kicking the fire into a higher blaze. "I've been bad company to-night, and I must make amends."

"Old John's in bed, I'll bet anything," yawned Trip, rising.

"Dear me, Mr. Trayner, it must be late. Midnight by my watch, I declare. How the time passes. I would never have thought it."

"Well, you will stay for a parting glass?"

"Mr. Trayner! Most certainly, sir, I will. It has turned out a shocking night, and who would have expected it. You can never judge by appearances now, can you?"

"No Mosely, you can't. Trip, run and get that bottle."

Trip dived out of the room and returned in a few minutes with news; Meff, his good lady, and everybody else, except a couple of lads in the kitchen, had been long in bed; the fire was out in the public parlour; the rain and the wind were enough to drive any honest man to his bottle. In evidence of this statement honest Trip had returned provided with a bottle.

The cork had just been drawn and the glasses charged when there came a sudden knocking at the side door, which opened out of the passage leading from the private parlour to the inn yard. Mr. Mosely's keen ears were the first to hear the interruption, and his face wrinkled up into lines of such anxious inquiry that Trip was quite startled.

"What's the matter with the man?" he asked irritably, dashing down his glass on to the table.

"I heard knocking, Mr. Trayner. Did you?"

"Yes, I certainly did, Mosely. There must be somebody at the outer door."

"Not at this hour, surely. No honest man would be out on such a night," said Trip.

"I wouldn't swear to it, Mr. Trayner; but unless I'm very much mistaken," put in Mosely, "why, there it is again."

There was no mistaking the knock this time. It was not loud, it was not aggressive, but it was persistent.

"Open the door, Trip," said Robert, jumping up from his chair.

The old jockey listened to the slow, even knocks, and seemed hardly able to credit his senses. He had been attached to the inn now, on and off, for some years, but never had the house suffered such a mysterious summons. Travellers, to be sure, had put up there at all hours of the night, but they had rolled into the yard in a good honest coach or chaise, with rumbling wheels, and cracking whips, and honest shouts. But there had been no timid tappings on these occasions at a little side door used mostly by the servant wenches and the stable lads. Such a summons for admission marked no honest travellers. Trip was alarmed.

"Did you hear Mr. Trayner, Trip? Why don't you open the door, Trip?" inquired Mr. Mosely, who had as yet made no sign of budging from his seat by the chimney-piece.

"Being so fond of obeying orders, Mosely, why not open it yourself," said the jockey, "for myself, as Mr. Trayner here knows well, I'm all for liberty, and when a man commands me I never, out of a principle of humanity, do his bidding."

"Is this a time for such talk? Politics and such like? I appeal to you, Mr. Trayner."

"It's a time when Trip looks like getting his head knocked off his shoulders. Pooh! you are a couple of cowards."

Robert snatched up a candle and strode with fine disgust into the passage. He had never yet known what it was to be afraid. Trip followed him, his

honest heart stung by the appellation of coward, which in truth the old fellow in no way deserved. Mr. Mosely observed, however, some distance from the others, the more properly to judge the disposition of the adventure. The knocking continued whilst Robert fumbled with the bolts on the inside of the door.

"Pull these bolts back, Trip. How do you turn them? There—you do it," he cried, angrily impatient.

The wind howled like a fury, then lulled.

"Mr. Trayner!—Oh, Robert!—Oh, Robert!" sobbed Mave's voice out of the tempest.

He shrank back for the moment, stunned by the surprise, shocked and astounded. Then he flung himself frantically against the door, knocking out the candle which he had given into Trip's keeping and bruising his wrist against the middle bolt. He dragged it back from its socket and swung the old door back on its squealing hinges. A great wind rushed in, driving the rain into his face. Trip had sunk on his knees behind the door. Robert's eyes strained into the darkness. Then he sprang out from the passage, a crazy cry on his lips, and fell down on his knees beside a huddled shadow that lay immediately in the doorway. She was stiff almost as a stone, but her hair blew out on the wind. Rain ran from her clinging garments in rivulets. She was sopped to the bone.

"My Mave, my child, my heart's sweet one."

He took her up into his arms, and she pressed upon him so that he felt giant sobs breaking in her bosom. He saw, as he passed into the parlour, swift little tearful tremors moving in her throat. He clasped her hand and thought she was drowned.

VI

THE KEY

HE placed her gently, with infinite gentleness in his chair by the fire, and knelt down by her side.

"Hush, my Mave, my child, my sweet one, hush. Oh, for God's sake, hush, Mave! These sobs will kill me. Don't, Mave; don't, darling, don't."

Her hair covered her face, hair wet and glistening with rain-drops. Her garments clung to her like a skin. She lay first on his shoulder, but after a while crept down into the breast of his coat, and lay there, fluttered like a storm-beaten bird that has, through perilous gales, winged a troubled flight to its mother's nest. Her face was cold; pure with the passion of sorrow. Robert was himself stirred to his heart's depths, and his compassion, the love-pity, transcended all verbal consolation.

"Hush, my Mave! . . . No more sobbings now. Hush! . . . Poor tears! See, I kiss them all away. Be comforted; . . . you shall be comforted, Mave. . . . O God, if she would only stop crying!"

Tears ran down his own cheeks, for he was oblivious to the presence of Mosely, still squatting in his chimney corner, and Trip, who stood in the doorway. The room seemed to Robert filled with dark shadows. It was blurred and indistinct in outline, and he hardly heard the storm's bluster outside in the stable yard

He was conscious of nothing but Mave, who was sweetly alive and trembling in his arms. Even his practical wit, which generally served him in good stead, despite his rhapsodic youth, had flown entirely, and he had no thought of the girl's dangerous condition and the need of taking immediate action. He was quite contented to know that she had come into his keeping, out of the rain and the night, and it was left for so mean a person as Jockey Trip to recall his mercurial senses. Trip it was who nudged his arms, Trip who shook him violently by the shoulders, Trip who thrust a glass of steaming brandy into his hands.

"Mr. Trayner, give her this. Nothing like it, Mr. Trayner. I hope the honest woman has no fever by the morning," he said, urging Robert to force the boiling liquor down her throat.

Mave swallowed a portion of it, coughed and spluttered, her pale cheeks suddenly burning scarlet.

"Heaven bless you, Trip. God reward you, Trip, my old friend, my dear old friend!" cried Robert, wringing the jockey's enormous hand in an outburst of excessive gratitude, which the old fellow in no way understood.

"Keep the cold out, Mr. Trayner. But that's nothing, the honest woman must drink at least a couple o' glasses."

"Now, Mave, now dear child . . just another sip. I must be your physician now . . . I must be everything to you. You must obey me . . . just another sip."

His left arm supported her, and she sat up on his knee now and drank the brandy like a dutiful child who has implicit trust in parental care. She sighed, shook back her wet hair, and her large eyes stared at Trip, who was grinning approbation at the empty

glass. She turned to Robert's glowing face, flashed him a smile of glad confidence, and subsided once more into the snuggery of his green coat. He could have hugged all the breath out of her frail body for that one smile. Trip stood, glass in hand, respectfully interested in the movements of Mave, in much the same manner as he would have regarded a strange spaniel or finely bred Irish cob, trotted out for his inspection. Mr. Mosely had relapsed into his chimney corner, and from motives of delicacy fixed his anxious gaze permanently on the left corner of the window cornice.

"Mave, darling, tell me, do you feel better now? You are not shivering now, child. Tell me, do you feel better?" whispered Robert.

Mave nodded.

"Much better?"

"Really better, . . . Robert."

There was still a tearful echo in her voice, which echo must immediately be stifled by many kisses. Mr. Mosely beat a light tattoo on the arm of his chair, but he had not the courage to whistle.

"How did it happen, Mave?" asked Robert. "What brought you here, dear one? Tell me, little Mave, what has happened?"

His words seemed to pain her, giving rise to cruel recollections, and he saw this and was grieved—inexpressibly grieved—the moment after the word had escaped his lips.

"Oh, they've been bad to me . . . bad! But my head is swimming, Robert, I feel dazed."

"No, no, you must not talk. I will ask you no more questions now . . . not another word, heart's darling. Be peaceful, Mave, peaceful, sweetheart."

Mr. Mosely raised himself laboriously from his

chair, coughed slightly, and took up a position before the fire, his hands thrust beneath his coat-tails. The expression on his face was one of discretion and reserve, an expression that Robert hated; an expression that he habitually wore when certain that a client would be hanged, and desirous of impressing every one with the notion that he was about to make important revelations, which would irrefutably disprove the very base, groundless, and malignant accusations the prosecution had made against the prisoner.

"Mr. Trayner, may I speak?" he inquired behind another cough.

"Certainly, Mosely."

"I have your permission?"

"Speak man, if you've anything to say; speak up, Moseley."

Mr. Mosely jerked his head towards the frail bundle of life in Robert's arms. Mr. Mosely appeared perturbed but wonderfully discreet.

"That young person is the same, I believe, Mr. Trayner, that we were discussing some short time back?"

"The same, Mosely. Anything else?"

"Well, Mr. Trayner, well, what is to become of her?"

"Become of her!"

"I am discussing to-night. What becomes of the young person to-night?"

"She stays with me, of course."

"Stays with you, Mr. Trayner, does she?"

Robert began to discern the drift of the attorney's remarks, and scowled at him savagely.

"That's enough, Mosely. She stays with me."

Mr. Mosely's demeanour became more official

every moment. One would almost have thought him engaged in preparing some line of defence in a litigious action.

"Close that door, Trip, if you please," he said. "I should be obliged for a few minutes' conversation with you, Mr. Trayner."

"Very well, Mosely. You look most mysterious, but—— Well, well, speak up."

"I have very little to say, Mr. Trayner. I believe you have a regard for that young person, and wish her well. All I have to say about the matter is, that she should be put into warm blankets at once, unless, of course, you wish her to wake up to-morrow morning in a chill fever. What do you think, Mr. Trayner?"

"You're right, Mosely. Why, of course you're right. What a fool I am never to have thought of it!"

"You agree, then?"

"Of course, man. She must be put to bed at once."

"How, Mr. Trayner?" asked the attorney, the slightest smile perceptible on his obsequious countenance.

Robert looked at him, and flushed up like a girl.

"How, Mosely! Why . . . why—— Trip, we must awaken John Meff."

"May I speak, Mr. Trayner?"

"Certainly, Mosely. Do speak, man, don't keep asking me."

"Well, you see, this is not my affair, Mr. Trayner, and I have no wish to interfere into business other than my own; but as you have given me permission I will say I think it would be very injudicious to awaken John Meff."

"Injudicious, Mosely!"

"The height of imprudence, Mr. Trayner."

"What reason have you for saying that?"

"A very simple and cogent one, too, I fancy. If you waken John Meff, you awaken his good lady."

"Well?"

"They are ignorant people, Mr. Trayner."

"Well?"

"I do not think that they will properly understand the situation. Think . . . do you, Mr. Trayner?"

"Do . . . I . . ."

Robert felt as though he had knocked his head against a brick wall. He would at that moment have liked to knock Mosely's head, chiefly because a little consideration showed him a substratum of truth in the attorney's remarks. This was annoying, but it was still more annoying that the man should discuss the matter as though he were engaged in a criminal conspiracy, with intolerable unction and a nervous affection of the right eye.

"Ain't the young woman honest?" inquired Trip, gazing open-mouthed from Mosely to Robert.

"By God . . ."

"Silence, Trip, silence," cried Mosely, for once speaking decisively.

Robert would have placed Mave on the chair, but she clung to him, sighing through her half-slumbers with a little moan. He hushed her in all tenderness, and when he looked at Trip again his anger had abated.

"Well, whether we waken John Meff or not, the child must be put to bed. Think of the time she has worn these drenched garments," he said, turning in his dilemma to Mosely, as a man possessed of some glimmer of intelligence.

"I have thought of that, Mr. Trayner. Trip, you

will have to waken one of the chambermaids—one of the women. Can you do it?"

"You shall be paid, Trip, for to-night's work," blurted out Robert.

Mr. Mosely waved his hand, seeming to suggest that general payment for the night's work would be forthcoming.

"Can you do it?" asked Robert. "Can you bring us one of the women, Trip?"

"I can try, Mr. Trayner, and seeing as the young woman is honest——"

The reviving anger in Robert's face even pierced those ancient barriers that restricted Trip's intelligence within such parochial boundaries. He dived at the door.

"Trip, Trip, one moment," called out Mosely.

"What's it now?"

"Mind whom you awaken. Bring us a sensible body—a woman of years. You understand, Trip, you understand."

Trip, man of many errands, departed on his latest commission. The fire in the parlour was burning low.

"It must be a terrible late hour, Mr. Trayner," observed Mosely, examining his watch.

"It is."

"Half-past one by my watch, I declare. Who would have thought it?"

Robert lifted up the flap of his coat. The tired face that lay upon his breast was the face of a sleeping child. Mave was breathing softly, and her cheeks glowed. Her eyes were closed, and the long dark lashes gemmed with tears.

"She is asleep," said Robert, in a reverential whisper.

"Tired, I dare say."

"Fast asleep! Little Mave is fast asleep!"

"Possibly very tired, Mr. Trayner."

Outside the rain and the wind were gradually lulling away. The candles burnt dim; there were grey caverns in the fire, and ashes strewed the hearth. The room had lost its cheery aspect for Robert; the bottles and the glasses and Trip's pipe evidenced a taproom. The former abode of cheerful friendship seemed, by light of Mave, to have darkened into the habitation of squalor. . . . Trip was heard descending the stairs and his unmistakable footfall was accompanied by a consequential pit-a-pat of female shoes. Trip's usual love-of-liberty step seemed to have acquired a timorous desire to shuffle in the presence of the pit-a-pat, which was persistent and in a way comparable to Mave's timid knockings at the passage door.

"Trip has found us a woman, Mr. Trayner. Now this young person can be put into warm blankets," said Mosely.

"Yes, yes, Mosely; your judgment has been excellent. She must be put to bed at once."

Trip entered the parlour and held the door respectfully for the entrance of a stout blousy woman, hastily attired in soiled petticoats and a profusion of wraps.

"Mrs. Braham, gentlemen," said Trip, by way of introduction. "I've told her as how this honest woman has——"

"That will do, Trip," interposed Mr. Mosely, speaking as one with long experience in affairs that necessitate delicate explanation. "Mrs. Braham, ma'am, this young person"—here Mosely pointed to Mave—"who is, I may say, a distant connection of

my friend, Mr. Robert Trayner, on the mother's side, and who is, therefore, entitled to his protection, has been staying lately with some friends in the neighbourhood. At great risk to herself, having important communications to make to Mr. Trayner, bearing certain matters of private urgency, which I am not at present permitted to divulge, she ventured out to-night with the very laudable design of personally interviewing Mr. Trayner. On this very praiseworthy errand the unfortunate young lady suffered a misadventure of the most distressing kind. She was caught in the storm, and when having surmounted, in a most astonishing fashion for a female, really perilous obstacles, lost her way. When at last the intrepid young lady did arrive at her destination, she was at once seized with swoonings. The natural timidity of a delicate constitution, you see, Mrs. Braham, reasserted itself. Under these circumstances, ma'am, it is preposterous to propose that she return home——"

"Preposterous! Cruel, wicked I should call it," interrupted Mrs. Braham.

Mosely waved his hand in florid acquiescence and sat down, feeling that he had played his part and that it had been an indisputable success.

"I know you to be a gentleman, Mr. Trayner," said Mrs. Braham, curtseying blandly. "You can be sure the poor heart will be well seen to here. I've got No. 5 for her, and, thanks be to Heaven, all is aired most proper, as we expected travellers as have not come yet. Oh, mercy, if she ain't wet to the bone! What can you all have been thinking of to let her sit in such things with me at your call?"

"Be gentle with her, ma'am," said Robert, feeling rather abashed at Mrs. Braham's consequence.

"That I will be. Here, Maria; come here girl. Now then, quick, with me to No. 5."

A white, slattern girl, with smarting eyes, shuffled yawning into the room, barefooted and clad in a filthy bed-gown. She was one of the kitchen hands who had been requisitioned into Mrs. Braham's service. A great deal of hurry and scurry ensued, Mrs. Braham dominating the proceedings. She expressed herself as scandalized at Maria's scanty raiment before the gentlemen. Also her sense of sex was shocked that Mave should have remained so long in wet garments. Likewise she delivered indiscriminate orders for oils and salts, warming pans and hot water. In brief, she behaved as any primitive matron would have behaved under similiar circumstances. Mave was carried forthwith up to No. 5 bedroom, Mrs. Braham indignantly sniffing at Robert's prayers for gentleness. . . . Gentle indeed! as though the sweet soul had not been allowed to rest—goodness only knew how long—in dripping garments, whilst three men—they called themselves men—stood by as though nothing were the matter. How merciful was the providence that had not allowed Mrs. Braham her customary sound sleep on this night of catastrophe! Rest had been mysteriously denied her. She had been, it seems, troubled by alarming premonitions that something dreadful would happen before the night was out; and had, in fact, twice risen from her bed under the impression that she detected the smell of fire. . . . The room seemed quite empty on the departure of Mrs. Braham.

But Robert liked the woman, whose strident verbosity, after all, was but the habitual mode of her class for expressing the kindly impulses of a motherly heart; and when she re-entered the parlour

some few minutes later, bringing information that Mave, rolled in warm blankets, after vigorous application of oils and restoratives, was sleeping like a "babe from heaven," he felt her solicitude and resource deserved almost affection. Her womanly intuition seemed to have gauged Robert's interests, and with much puffing and blowing, in witness of personal exertions undertaken for the benefit of Mave, she volunteered a full glowing recital of the girl's return to animation beneath the kindly care of her own ministering hands. Robert listened to this narrative as though it had been some wondrous tale of Araby or Spain, his cheeks fired, his heart beating in wild excitement, his soul touched to gratitude. But Mr. Mosely was of another humour. Mrs. Braham's excursions into the realms of polite fiction did not interest him, and rising with a yawn, he felt for his hat and cane.

"I don't think I can do any more, do you, Mr. Trayner?" he asked. "I think I had better be jogging homewards. What my good lady will think of me at this hour, I can't say."

"Good night, Mosely, good night," said Robert, perfunctorily gracious.

The attorney made Mrs. Braham a civil bow and hesitated at the door, his forehead wrinkled up for a final inquiry.

"May I call in the morning, Mr. Trayner, just to talk matters over a bit with you?"

"You may, Mosely, certainly. Good night."

Robert heard the retreating footsteps of the attorney crossing the yard. He was glad the fellow had departed, frankly glad because his manner had implied a secret understanding between Robert and himself; had indeed hinted that this affair of Mave

was an adventure requiring his dubious talents for its successful accomplishment. This would seem to dishonour Mave. It was villainous also to reflect that the man was justified of his artifice, to be obliged to acknowledge to one's self that, save for his dubious talents, the adventure must probably have ended in odium and disorder. It was another unseemly trick of Destiny's to have mixed such creatures as Trip—honest but of low repute—and Mosely, the sordid juggler with the profane banalities of the law, into the sacred theme—theme rather than person—of Mave. The thought of such base trickery disgusted Robert, although in their respective and proper stations he liked Trip and Mosely well enough. But Mave was aureoled in pale sanctity, and must remain inviolate from the crooked products that boil and fester in the lower depths of this swampy world. . . . Mrs. Braham, thought Robert, was of another quality. Her simple soul seemed, with that wonderful intuitive power of creatures born blind, to have grasped at once in some measure the significance of Mave. She had even called Mave "a babe from heaven," a figure that had moved Robert to astonishment, because one would hardly have expected a housekeeper in a country inn to illustrate her conversation with so just and illuminating a notion. . . . Trip had disappeared for the night, and Robert, glad to be in the company of a woman of such sensibility, talked to Mrs. Braham of Mave until even that good lady's rigorous sense of manners could not repress a yawn. Then Robert felt that he had been guilty of cruelty. Surely the poor creature must want to be in bed at that hour, and here he was engaging her in incessant conversation. He thanked her for all her kindnesses, thanked her profusely, opened the door, and, with much boyish

temerity, slid a couple of Uncle William's guineas into her hand.

"I want you to buy yourself some ribbons, ma'am," he stammered. "Some little thing . . . anything, ma'am . . . just to show I remember all your kindness."

Mrs. Braham babbled her thanks, her florid face glowing excess of goodwill and appreciation of Mr. Trayner's gentlemanlike qualities. Just as she was about to make her exit, however, she sidled up to him and, chatting pleasantly about the amount of work that must be done in the morning, clasped his hand. She blinked, withdrew her hand again, drew up her petticoats and wraps and mounted the stairs with her customary importance. She had left a key in Robert's hand and he stared at it, turned it over and examined it in blank amazement, until it dawned upon him that it was the key to Mave's room. The blood rushed into his face and he flung the key from him across the room. It fell beneath a chair. . . . Should be hasten after Mrs. Braham and cry out the vile name that befitted her character? Should he remonstrate and represent the horror of her conduct? No, no; that would be mere folly, mere pleading to stone; the woman was insensate, damned, abominable. He flung himself once more into a chair and sat brooding over the miserable course of the evening's enterprise. Tears filled his eyes and youthful wrath inflamed his high heart. How puny were the world's conceptions, how vile its bias, how unutterably contemptible its boasted wisdom! What a world! the world that looked with naked eyes on All Loveliness—spirit expressed in flesh—and had naught on its obscene lips to cry but "Harlot!" Oh, this world . . .!

So he sat musing until a starved light penetrated into the squalid parlour and made plain all its nauseous relics of the night's good fellowship, when Robert picked up the key to Mave's room and silently ascended the stairs. He had a great longing to see her asleep in the dawn, and he pushed the key into the lock and turned the handle of her door. He stood on the threshold of the darkened room trembling, conscious of a certain sensation of shame, a feeling that he was a furtive intruder upon sanctity. But the impulse was upon him, and he crossed the room and stood by the old square four-post bedstead. He drew back the window blinds and saw by the dawn's first struggling rays Mave's warm hair loosened upon her neck and bosom. She lay half on her side, one hand clutched to her breast and the other pillowing her hair. He thought her face most piteously young in the quietude of slumber. She breathed evenly, her pulsations were slow and regular, and, all the time Robert stood before her bed, stirred and sighed only once, and then but a faint catch in the breath and a gentle sidling deeper down beneath the coverlet. Robert stood filled by a timorous but profound reaching ecstasy, like one who stands and feels before an altar. And as the dawn came forth at last in glimmering splendour and made the face of Mave a white and happy fire, the sense of loveliness drew so deeply on his soul that he felt thrilled—not experiencing as often before in his life a comfortable pleasure—but thrilled by a hard penetrating bliss. The dawn filled the room now ; Mave's coverlet was quilted in fine gold, and there was bronze and trembling sunlight in her hair. One small foot was thrust from beneath the coverlet, a foot shaded like pale roses and fit only to kiss the flowers or

dabble in the dim water of fairy pools. Robert sank upon his knees and just touched it with his lips. He stole quietly from the room, almost in the manner of one returning cleansed from some long penitential vigil.

VII

THE CONVERSATION

"AND how long have they been in that parlour, Trip?" asked Mrs. Meff, a shrill-voiced woman, with grey, sparkling eyes and an animated manner.

"Not more than an hour, I should say, ma'am," answered Trip, feeling that Mrs. Meff implied a personal challenge.

"And when do you say the young woman came last night, Trip?"

For the tenth time that morning the unhappy Trip, forced into an assumption of extreme amiability from his dependent position, repeated the history of Mave's entry into the inn. The reason why Mrs. Meff demanded so constant a repetition of the story was that she—astute woman—was intent on detecting discrepancies in the several narratives. But Trip knew Mrs. Meff, and was at pains to adhere to the narrow lines of honest truth. So Mrs. Meff, although constitutionally adverse to the intrusion of the Romantic Spirit into a house offering such reputable entertainment as her own, was partially mollified.... Meanwhile Robert sat in his private parlour, the long windows of which were thrown open upon a morning fresh and sweet-smelling from the night's rains. Mave was seated in the window niche, idly picking a bundle of wild flowers to pieces, and

repeating once more since breakfast the history of those circumstances conducive to her arrival on the previous night. She was perhaps a little paler than usual, and dark rings encircled her eyes, but she appeared to have braved the elements with little hurt, and Robert, who had listened all morning for the smallest sign of a cough, when he would have wished to instantly slay himself for allowing her to remain so long in drenched garments, felt that Heaven was juster than he had before imagined. He sat close to her, watching her every movement; the ripple of her simple gown, a gift from Mrs. Braham, the smile that flashed and fled from her lips, and all the many lights that shone and subsided in her eyes. It was marvellous to realize that she was so near to him—but a hand's breadth away; it was miraculous to see the light wind and sunshine dappling her loosely ribboned hair. He experienced a stern delight in knowing that she was under his protection, in feeling that he constituted her full resource.

"So it was Miss Wardale's doing, was it, my sweet Mave?" said Robert, treasuring her hand.

She nodded with that peevish look of self-commiseration that gave to her at times so childlike an air of small consequential sorrow.

"She was always bad to me, Robert, always bad," she said, "and when she loved you it was worse. I went up to her room directly after you had gone the last time—she had seen you going from her window, and questioned me—I told her everything you had said. . . ."

"Oh, little Mave, my dear child!"

"Yes, Robert; I told her everything, and she went hot and red in the face, and began to beat me."

"To beat you! If I had been there, Mave—if

any one should dare touch you when I am present!" cried Robert, outraged at the mere suggestion.

"But no one would dare to touch me when you are there, Robert."

"They would not, Mave."

"No, they would be afraid, Robert."

"I should be very sorry for them if they did touch you, dearest, very sorry indeed."

It might outrage Robert to imagine Mave suffering contumely in his presence, but she herself was quietly amused, deeming such occurrence inconceivable. Who was there born sufficiently audacious to offer her rude reproach or despiteful treatment when guardianed by Robert? Of a truth the supposition was absurd.

"But no one would dare to touch me, Robert."

"I should be sorry for them, as I said, Mave."

Mave also shared his pity for the misguided persons, granted that such were existent, upon whose wretched pates, once they insulted her, would be poured the vials of her lover's tremendous wrath. She looked so much, and continued her story.

"Well, Miss Wardale drove me out of her room, and I went downstairs and cried in the shop for quite an hour; and then, although she had been abed for three days nearly, she came down and began it all over again. 'What did you say? What did you like? What did you wear?' I told her everything, and she got more angry still. And then she said, 'I should not wonder if he loves me after all, and has been making mock of you, miss.' And I said, 'No; that I'm sure. He said he had no great liking for you at all.' She went so white when I said this, and when I told her that you had promised always to be my friend, and had called me dearest Mave, she went off suddenly

into screamings, and began to beat at me with her hands, and tear my hair. 'So you are the young man's creature, are you?' she cried, fighting. 'He is my friend, and I love him, and I hate and despise you;' I said, flinging her from me with all my strength."

"Strength! What strength have you got, little Mave?"

"Oh, indeed, Robert, I am very strong when I am angry like that. I am strong, Robert, and brave too, but Miss Wardale frightened me. She was off her balance when I flung her from me, and she fell to the ground. When she got up her face was awful—awful; blood running from her lips. I think she would have killed me then, but I fled from her, shrieking so that all the neighbourhood must have heard. I ran through the door and out into the High Street, where there was only a light rain falling then. I ran on and on, and I thought my heart would stand still from pain and hate of Miss Wardale. I never stopped, Robert, until I had gone far past the High Street. I was so hot all over, and my eyes seemed to be burning, and my lips were quite dry."

"Poor darling Mave! And then?"

"And then, Robert, I thought of you."

"You thought of me at once?"

"Yes, Robert."

"Immediately?"

"Yes."

"You did not think of anybody else?"

"No, Robert; only you."

"Tell me why, Mave?"

"Because you promised to be my friend. Because you said I must look to you always in distress or trouble."

This simple trust that allowed no inward comment on a situation which, in the polite seeing of the modern world, must seem extraordinary and exotic, pierced him. Mave was so blind to the need of fanciful excuse for explaining her relationships with one whom, by all canons of modern intercourse between the sexes, must be estimated at the doubtful quantity of acquaintance. Such implicit trust forced Robert's growing sense of responsibility. It was as though a sidereal liquor having been poured into a chalice, and the chalice delivered into his keeping, he must travel through the turbulent inclemencies that beset the rough pilgrimage of man's journey with watchful caution, careful lest the brimming cup fall broken from his hands, and the golden wine be spilt on flinty quartz or deep suctorial morass. The responsibility was great, but not burdensome, the trust being sacred, and every danger compassed in its accomplishment therefore a delight.

"So because I promised to be your friend, Mave, you thought of me as soon as you were in trouble?"

"Yes, Robert; it was only right I should do so."

"But you did not come until late?"

"I was afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Yes, Robert."

"Afraid of me? Mave!"

"Oh no, Robert."

"What then?"

"Afraid of the inn, the yard, the people. I think I must have crept up to the edge of the yard a dozen times, and always my courage failed me at the last moment. As it grew later I became more frightened. I thought it would be better when the yard was

empty; but then it seemed so cold and big and desolate that I was more afraid than ever."

"Poor little Mave! If I had only known you were out there, afraid to knock to ask for me, I should have run out at once and carried you in."

"You would have carried me in out of the cold, Robert."

"Yes, little sweet one."

"And how glad I should have been, Robert."

"But I knew nothing; I had not a thought of what was happening."

"No."

"Well, let us forget it. Let us forget all the misery of past days. You came to me yourself, and you are safe."

"Yes, Robert, I came. I was driven."

"What?"

"I was driven."

He flushed and caught her hand closer, divining in a moment further horrors in the already lengthy history of Mave's disquietudes.

"Yes, I was driven in . . . that gave me courage."

"A man?"

"Yes, a man."

"Tell me what he did? Tell me all, Mave."

"He was staggering through the rain, and I did not see him until he was almost upon me. He was a huge, fierce man, Robert, with wild eyes, and when he saw me shivering in a corner he laughed and caught me in his arms."

"In his arms!—O God!" groaned Robert.

"I was like a babe in his arms, he was so strong. Then he held up the lantern he was carrying and looked in my face, and when he saw me like that he

swore an oath and pressed me to him and began to kiss me."

"Oh, God, have mercy on me! To kiss you, Mave? To kiss you?"

"And then, Robert, I was so frightened that I grew strong again, just as I had been with Miss Wardale, and I struggled away from him — tore myself away—before he had time to tighten his hold, and then——"

"And then?"

"I ran and ran until I found you, Robert."

"May this man be struck dead, Mave. I say it calmly; I mean it. May he be struck dead."

"He hurt me, Robert."

"Oh, I curse him, Mave, I curse him."

"He bruised me a little, too. I think it was that made me swoon. . . . Oh, Robert, when you took me in your arms, when you carried me in here, all the warmth seemed to come back to me . . . it was wonderful."

She looked away from him into the sunlight, and smiled quietly over the remembrance.

"You were happy, Mave?"

"I was—with you."

"You are always happy with me?"

"Always."

"You always will be?"

"Always—I know it."

"But you have known me only a few days."

"What is that, Robert? I seem to have known you all my life."

"I feel like that, too, Mave. I cannot remember life without you. I swear you were always hovering near me. I had thoughts of you. I knew you dimly."

"I don't quite understand you, Robert."

"I mean God told me that I should one day meet you—that we were destined to meet—that we were for one another."

She sat gazing out of the window, singing softly to herself and smiling. She began to sway as though in a swing. Her brows contracted and her underlip drew in between her teeth. Mave was in thought.

"Robert," said she, on a sudden, "do you know that I am very wicked?"

"Mave, sweetheart!"

"Very wicked."

"Why?"

"I hate God."

Robert was shocked. Robert came of sound, middle-class stock and, despite his political heresies and inflammatory babblings, he was shocked.

"Mave! Child! What are—are—you saying?"

"Yes, I hate God."

She spoke with a quiet resignation, as though constrained to acknowledge an irremediable condition of things that must be suffered in spite of the unhappiness consequent upon their existence. She still swung herself and smiled.

"But why, Mave?"

"Because He is so friendly with the parson, and I hate the parson."

Robert looked at her, shaking betwixt uncomfortable gravity and uproarious laughter. He was compelled to smother her in his arms, for at this moment she seemed to him not so divine as winsome. The dear child with her winsome blasphemies! Of course, she was unaware that such talk was very wrong. Also, she could not see that it was highly ridiculous. . . . The dear child!

"So you hate the parson. So do I, Mave. I have seen him and I hate him. I had nothing to do last Sunday, so I went to his church and saw the parson; a big, mottled-faced man, all snuff and gruntings."

"Yes, that is the man; and nobody ever talks about God except the parson."

"Hush! . . . *I* love God; *I* worship God, Mave."

"You do, Robert?"

"Yes, because all loveliness is the child of God."

The advent of Mave had awakened a dormant spiritual sense in Robert. Her beauty made him devout, as is sometimes the case with young men.

"God is the father of all loveliness, Mave; that is why I try to love and worship Him. The stars are His playthings, Mave. . . ."

"The stars are His playthings!" she echoed gravely.

"The stars are His playthings," repeated Robert, pleased at the conceit.

Mave swung herself more thoughtfully than ever.

"Then what are we, Robert? What use is there for us—for all people—if the stars are God's playthings?"

Robert's thoughts, at their customary gallop, had to be leashed in abruptly and diverted into fresh channels. Mave was suggestive; she staggered nice broad-cloth wisdom with a child's nakedness of speech. Mave was stimulating. Mave had a queer trick of expression, an individual habit of thought. Robert was surprised: Robert was wonderstruck. He did not trouble to inquire whether Mave was alive to the many surprising and original speculative possibilities that were started by her remark. But he was pleased to find her profound. It was proof

positive that he had chosen well in Love's market, and would be mated in mind as well as body.

"Child," said he, "if you were more of a woman and less of a goddess, nothing would suit you so well as being a philosopher's wife. I perceive you have a turn for such things, Mave."

"Indeed, Robert! But why call me a goddess?"

"Because I always think of you as one, Mave; as a child of the gods, rather as one of those sweet intangible creatures who inhabit elemental streams and dark forests."

"Really inhabit streams and forests?"

"Of course no, Mave. I only see them in fancy; my mind sees them."

"Then for you, Robert, they are really there, in the streams and the forests?"

"Yes; for me, Mave, they are really there."

"Does no one else see them?"

"Very few, Mave, very few now, indeed."

"And why is that?"

"Because they are so intangible. One has to preserve one's mind like a mirror, very pure, to catch sight of such shadows."

"And when you see them you are happy?"

"No, Mave. When man has seen the gods or the nymphs he is always unhappy."

"And you say I am like the creatures who make all who see them unhappy. . . . Oh, Robert!"

"Yes, I say that."

"And do I make you unhappy, Robert . . . very unhappy?"

"You fill me with longing, Mave, a longing to attain perfection. I am unhappy with myself."

"I am sorry; you will make me weep."

"Child!"

"Yes, you will grow to hate me. I make you unhappy, and you will hate me. Oh, I am sure of it."

"Listen, Mave; there are some unhappinesses that are worth all the vulgar pleasures of the world. You have given me that unhappiness, and I am grateful to you. It is really a great bliss."

"Great bliss is happiness."

"No, it is more than happiness."

"And I give you great bliss?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I'm so glad, Robert—so glad. Kiss me, Robert, you make me feel—great bliss too."

It did not strike him in any way strange that Mave should ask for his kisses. In any other woman the action would have been monstrous, but with Mave one became insensibly reconciled to the freedom of the woods. One saw life with a new perspective, and the conventions became indecent. . . . Robert held Mave to him and drew upon her lips, and she gave him freely of herself in tremulous wonderment and dumb desire, that panted for expression in a kiss. She sighed deeply and slid down on to his breast, all her dark tresses unribboned and her whiteness flushed with fervent warmth.

"Robert," she whispered presently.

"Mave—yes, my own."

"Do you feel—great—great bliss now?"

"More than that, Mave, sweetest."

"I am glad."

"And you?"

"I—feel nothing."

"Nothing?"

"A sort of sleep, Robert."

"Sleep!"

"Yes, a sort of—a sort of dying out of myself. A sort—a sort of going away. You seem to have drawn something from me. My breast aches."

"Oh, Mave! You are pained? Unhappy?"

"No, no; I like the ache, Robert. It pleases me."

He felt that though he might hold her thus for a thousand years she could make no greater, no more convincing or illuminating a confession of perfect love. She loved the pains that he inflicted. The ache pleased her. Verily he had caught her now and could hold her fast against all the infinite machinations of time and custom. All love found a source in pain. As things were ordered the pale wings of Love must swirl for ever in the gloomy vaults inhabited by Pain, Eternity's most sad immortal prisoner. Therefore those who would know Love, who would suck upon his lips, who were minded to abide beneath the tired wave of his pinions, must learn that life with love is conditioned by pain, and indeed must find their delights in those natural elements of sorrow in which alone love breathes. And Mave liked the ache! Verily she was Love's anointed, verily! Mave raised her lips.

"Kiss me again, the ache is not so great now."

"I will make it greater."

"Yes, Robert, please. Kiss me again."

VIII

NEWS FROM LONDON

BY the next morning Robert had put his affairs upon a more reasonable basis. Having very wisely decided to dispense with all further service from the dubious talents of Mr. Mosely, he had himself approached John Meff's good lady and explained matters to her in perfect frankness and good nature. And Mrs. Meff had steered her way through the waters of dilemma with a nicety that must have afforded her husband, if he ever needed it, ample evidence of his wife's self-vaunted address in all matters requiring diplomatic settlement. Naturally, as her house was under frequent call from the very highest quality, she was anxious that its fair repute should remain untarnished from any stigma attaching to the tribe of wandering females, and, from this point of view, it would have been safer to turn Mave from her doors without hesitation. But, on the other hand, here was Mr. Robert Trayner vouching for the respectability of the girl, and Mrs. Meff could not afford—as what innkeeper's wife could afford, be she ever so reputable?—to doubt the word and court the displeasure of a liberal-minded guest. Mrs. Meff assured Robert that she would gladly stake her soul and other properties on Mave being as pure as heaven, but reminded him that the world was not quite as good in thought as well as deed as it might have been had

Mr. Trayner had the making of it. Mrs. Meff, who felt very strongly on the subject, represented then the urgent need of safe-guarding Mave from the aspersions of the low and jealous minded. Here Robert remarked Mrs. Meff was a woman of much sensibility. Mrs. Meff then further proposed that so long as Mave remained under her roof, she should share a bedroom with her niece Eliza, also that meals be served in the public parlour. To this latter proposal Mr. Robert Trayner raised several objections, and alternatively proposed that meals be served in his private parlour and should there be shared by the said Eliza, who seemed a decent sort of neutral body. This proposal was welcomed by Mrs. Meff, who acknowledged a high opinion of Mr. Trayner's gentlemanlike behaviour, and the matter forthwith terminated in complete satisfaction to all parties concerned. Meanwhile Mr. Mosely, anxious that his dubious talents should not rest entirely idle, had despatched honest Trip to Miss Wardale's, instructing him to peremptorily demand that all goods and chattels belonging to Miss Mave O'Moran be instantly delivered up to that young lady. Trip returned in due course, laden with a hat-box and a bundle of female clothing, and was the object of several verbal pleasantries from the stable boys as he passed thus burdened through the yard.

"What did she say, Trip? Nothing slanderous, I hope," inquired Mr. Mosely, eagerly.

"Oh, nothing at all. The young 'ooman seems sorry for what she's done; hopes Miss O'Moran wasn't hurt in no way; said if she liked she might go back there as before."

"Miss Wardale, I see, is afraid, Trip. She must know that I'm acting in this matter. She must be

afraid that further action will be taken. Don't you think so, Mr. Trayner?"

"I think nothing at all about Miss Wardale, Mosely. As for these bundles, they could well have stopped where they were. Miss O'Moran shall have the finest gowns this town can provide."

All the morning was spent in shopping, in parading the High Street; Mave on Robert's arm, and Eliza Meff walking listlessly on the other side. Every one remarked the party, the handsome grace of the London gentleman, and the strangeness of the baggage who served in the ribbon-shop. Robert, quick almost as a woman in his perceptions, felt the vile undercurrent that ran beneath the town-peoples' civility, and he was glad when all the purchases had been made, and Mave was once more safe in the inn parlour. The town by this time was humming over the "affair," and when Miss Emma Wardale, having seen Mave pass her window on Robert's arm, shrink closer to him and smile up into his face, relapsed into one of her screaming fits, there were plentiful offers of assistance from scandalized neighbours.

In the afternoon Robert took Mave for a drive, and this time Eliza was left at home. All the country was keen from the late rains, brightly green and odorous. They went into the woods, and Mave was shown that tiny pool sunk amongst the trees and hedged by reedy verdure, on the banks of which, in a morning's mood, her pale face had first flitted into Robert's fancy. They drove farther, passed smooth, level lawns, large stretches of undulating meadows, bright sportive rivulets and cool gardens. All the time they explored one another's moods and thoughts, pressed one another's hands, and in great solitude ventured a kiss. Tea was brought out to them from

a little wayside ale-house, where a number of chickens clucked and pecked about the road. Then, when the shadows began to fall gently and distance was veiled in blue luminous haze, and the sun was melting in sullen fire on the hilltops, they drove through the deepening quietude homeward. They did not talk so volubly now, but were content to rest upon one another and draw into their young hearts the full sweetness of that hour; to remember the past favours of the day, and to rejoice in the grey loveliness of smouldering eve, so beautified, so inexpressibly tinged by the sobbing plenty of their glad emotions. Mave's bonnet was on her lap and the light wind played upon her hair, so that it was all rippled, and showed near the neck and temples little streaks of dark bronze gold. Robert watched her intently, and saw her face "even as the waking stars," and in one moment of uncontrollable ecstasy, when their lips clung together, saw deeper than ever before into her mournful eyes, so sad with so much loving. It seemed that he might gaze down into them for ever, as into some ghostly pool of fathomless distance.

"We are nearly back. There is the inn, Mave. Do you see the lights in the yard?"

"Yes."

A pause.

"Have you been happy?"

"To-day?"

"Yes, to-day."

"In heaven, Robert."

"Oh, Mave, darling Mave, you are sorry it is all ended then?"

Mave drew the cloak round her shoulders with a little shiver.

"It's like dying to come back," she whispered, a catch in her breath.

"Like dying, Mave?"

"Like death, Robert, It's an end, isn't it? And when anything ends it always seems to me like a death."

"Child, what sad thoughts!"

"I have felt sad all day, Robert—only so happy."

"No more sad thoughts now, little precious one. Nothing is ending; only the day is dying; our life is just beginning. Look at those trees, Mave, tall and dark, and waving so mournfully in the breeze. Look, Mave! and there's the moon! Our moon, Mave! All lovers should prate about the moon, you know. Our moon! Poor moon! how white and beautiful she looks, peering at us from between the trees! She is like you, Mave."

"Like me?"

"Yes . . . yes . . . white; white and full of—full of sacred loveliness. There, that is what you are like."

"I am so glad you think so, dear Robert."

They were whirling along at a fine pace, where strange lights flash in the magical stillness that knows no tide nor ebb and flow. The remembrance of that day, perhaps more especially of that immediate hour, remained with him throughout his life, and it always seemed to him this very memory proved that there are moments in our earthly travail which, if not outweighing all eternity, offer the heart a certain compensation, and by their qualities diffuse light, and thus raise shadows to relieve the otherwise monotonous urbanity of gloom through which the human heart shuttles from the womb to the grave.

Such moments teach us to endure and to walk meekly. But a moment, a blissful moment, is transient as the lightning's course, and by the time the moon was up and calmly settled above the dark fluttering of the trees, the squalid lights of the town were winking in the distance. They drove into the darkened High Street. Few people were abroad, and these all making for their homes. Through the drawn window-curtains of the houses little lights could be seen discreetly flickering, redolent of tea and candles and quiet conversation. At such an hour there is a pleasant sense of mystery pervading the smallest adventure, and there was much excuse for Mave creeping closer to Robert's heart.

"Do you think, Robert, I shall always be the same to you?" she said; "the same as I am this evening?"

"The same, child?"

"Yes, the same."

"In what way?"

"Will you always think of me as white and full of sacred loveliness?"

"Always, Mave."

"Always love me?"

"Always."

"Never grow tired, Robert?"

"Tired! Oh, Mave!"

"Never think somebody else is white and full of sacred loveliness?"

"Mave, darling Mave! My own, do you doubt me?"

"No, Robert. I only thought——"

"But you must not, Mave. You will always be the same to me, darling. Until I die, Mave, I must love you. Nothing can alter that now; nothing can

ever change it. You are all the world can give me; all life has to offer me; there is nothing——"

"Dearest Robert, I am so glad. And you are quite sure, Robert, you could never care for any one else, not even in the smallest way?"

"Yes, Mave, I am sure. Would you mind if I did?"

"Mind! I should die, Robert."

It was not a week since Mave had been a child. Now she had loved, become a woman, and was asking from Robert all eternity. Robert's woodland goddess seemed, after all, to have much in common with her mortal sisters.

They had reached the inn, spun through the High Street and into the yard, where Trip and Eliza Meff were in waiting. Robert threw the reins to Trip, and with a great exercise of the most zealous care lifted Mave—oh marvellous light burden!—down to the ground.

"Anything waiting for us, Trip?" asked Robert, thinking of his injunctions to Mrs. Meff to provide the finest dinner in the town.

"Anything waiting, Mr. Trayner. Yes, there's an honest-looking man in the little parlour as has been waiting the last two hours on end."

"An honest man in the parlour waiting for me!"

"Yes; from London he comes, I think."

"From London! It must be from my uncle."

Robert left Mave in the company of Eliza Meff, and hurried into the parlour, where he found a stout, elderly man, of the middle class, awaiting him. The man was a stranger to Robert.

"Mr. Robert Trayner, I believe," said he, making a stiff obeisance.

"Yes, sir."

"My name is Wilson. I am passing through these parts from London, and I bear a letter for you."

The little man, who had an uncomfortable habit of blinking between his words and a rather timid manner, produced the letter from his coat, and handed it to Robert.

"Pray be seated, sir. I will call for some wine immediately. Meanwhile, pardon me while I read this letter," said Robert, opening the note in evident anxiety.

He broke the seal, and at once recognized, in the long, careful handwring, the penmanship of his cousin, Mrs. Clarke.

"Dear Cousin Robert," ran the letter, "I make no doubt that it will surprise you to hear from me but the Truth is our Uncle William is lying near to Death and Mr. Wilson who is in the office of my Husband being obliged to pass through the parts where you are staying we thought it well to send a letter by Him. Our Uncle William was struck by a stroke and it is most unlikely that he will ever recover but in the meantime of course my good Father has taken charge of his Business. I must say Cousin Robert that we are all more than surprised at your long Silence seeing as you were expected to have Valued the Properties and have made a Report on Same long ere This. What this Silence of Yours does really mean Goodness only knows but the Fact remains undisputed that as my good Father says you have had Time ample and over to put the whole Town under valuation a dozen Times and I am sure dear Cousin Robert even You would not be so foolish

as to do that. Our poor Uncle William when he has Strength to speak often expresses a wish to see You Cousin Robert and although it is Hard for a Cousin to say and She a woman I cannot but deem it my plain Duty to tell you that we all think your very strange conduct has conduced Somewhat to his present very precarious State of health but of course You will understand Me when I say that we do not for one Moment suppose you to be responsible for the Seizure and——"

Robert crumpled the letter in his hands, sick at heart, and without courage to continue further deciphering its interminable sentences. His conscience pricked him, and he felt a nasty tugging at the heart. While ordering a bottle of wine for Mr. Wilson his thoughts were centred on his uncle. He could see nothing but the picture of an old face, almost woman-like in its passive simplicity, lying on huge pillows, one lean arm stretched out upon the flowered counterpane, and death—Almighty Death!—preserving a grim vigil by the bed-side. He could see Peter Trayner, the uncle whom he had always hated, shuffling about the room, and examining the furniture in his habitual manner, whilst his daughter, Mrs. Clarke (she of the indiscriminate capitals), wept aloud, and asked if the dying man felt faint, or would like her salts. If he could only reach London before the end came, just in time to whisper his gratitude to Uncle William, and to close those kindly eyes. . . . Augh! Death was horrible!

"You seem afflicted, sir," stammered Mr. Wilson, with his nervous blink.

"I am sir. Pray take this wine. I thank you for all your kind offices."

"Not a word, sir; my pleasure, I'm sure. I trust I have not brought you bad news."

"You have; awful news. My uncle, Mr. William Trayner, is dying. Do you know him?"

"No, sir; but I have heard some mention of his illness. I have met Mr. Peter Trayner, though."

"Peter is a very different personage, and so is his daughter, Jane Clarke. But I forgot you are in Mr. Clarke's office."

"I am a partner, sir."

"Indeed! Are they all well, Mrs. Clarke and Peter, the father?"

"Very well, I thank you."

"I could have sworn it."

"They are naturally healthy, sir?"

"I dare say they are."

"Health is a great blessing, sir."

"Sometimes, Mr. Wilson. Peter and Mrs. Clarke will probably live for ever, or very near it."

"Indeed, sir."

"Yes, indeed. And do you know why, Mr. Wilson?"

"No, sir."

"I will tell you. They will live for ever because nobody wants them."

"Good gracious, sir, what can you mean?"

"I hope my words are plain to you, Mr. Wilson. God always takes the flowers and leaves the refuse. Have you remarked that fact, Mr. Wilson?"

Mr. Wilson was scandalized, but thought the young man mad, and, declining a further glass of wine, betook himself on his journey. Robert watched him contemptuously trot on his little town-bred nag out of the yard.

"Just the sort of man Clarke would engage as a

partner. I can imagine him playing whist with my cousin Jane, while old Peter revokes and examines the candle-sticks. Pretty people! Pretty people! Oh, my poor Uncle William, my poor dear uncle!"

Robert remarked nothing to Mave until dinner was cleared, but twice during the meal she leant towards him and whispered—

"Robert, you are in trouble."

"Yes, darling Mave, I am in sore trouble," he said at length, having dismissed Eliza Meff for a short season from their company.

"Oh, tell me, Robert. I will try and help you."

He read her the letter, then threw it into the fire, and thrust at it savagely with the poker until it was nothing but crumbled cinder. Tears brimmed Mave's eyes, and she came and caressed him, until beneath her touch, he well-nigh broke down and wept himself. He was young, and felt such emotion in a man needed explanation. So he drew Mave close to him, and, cherishing her by the firelight, told some little portion of his life.

"You must know, Mave, that my mother—my mother died at my birth. I never knew her, but I hated my father. Yes, I confess it; let the truth be told. My father was a fierce old man, and when he stalked into a room you would think it had been struck by a tempest. He never liked me, Mave, never understood me."

"Never liked you, Robert, and he your father!"

"Never liked me, Mave, because I resembled my mother, whom he had used so cruelly, and I think the sight of me tortured him. I remember a terrible quarrel we had five years ago last June, when he cursed me and seemed like an angry spirit raging at the quiet peace of that summer evening. I shall

remember that scene until I die, Mave. The only man who has loved me, who has been a friend to me, is Uncle William, who is as gentle as my father was fierce. I have lived under his care for years now, Mave. He is a broker, a man of business, like all the members of my father's family—there was quality in my mother though, thank God!—and he has an office off a road called Cheapside. He sent me here, Mave, to value some property belonging to Sir John Bolton, which my uncle had engaged to sell, and I was so glad to get away from London and the dull routine of an office—I can't bear an office, Mave—that I have been loitering here ever since. But now I see it was all in the dark workings of Destiny that I ever came here. It was God's work, Mave."

She pressed on his heart gently. "Do you say that because it was here that you met me?"

"Yes, Mave, sweetest."

"Oh, I love you, Robert, I love you. I weep for your poor uncle."

He kissed the long wet lashes that lay upon her cheeks, and contrived to find comfort from his own sorrow in stilling her troubled flow of tears.

"Don't weep so, Mave darling. It will be but for a few weeks."

"A few weeks, Robert!"

"Hardly that, my own. Don't weep so, child. . . . Be strong, little one, and help me."

"Help you?"

"You promised you would, Mave."

"And I will, Robert. . . . But I do not understand you."

"You see that it is necessary, but only for a few weeks."

"What, Robert? What? Speak!"

The sudden fear that blanched her face told him that she had been in utter ignorance of his designs.

"Oh, Mave, I thought you understood . . . I thought you understood when you read that letter."

"What, Robert? Please, dear Robert, tell me. Understood what?"

"I thought . . . it will be but for a few weeks . . . I thought . . . it has to be, Mave . . . I thought you—you knew that I should be obliged to leave you a little while."

"Leave me! You . . . Robert?"

"Only for a few weeks, my precious. You see I must hasten to—to London."

She gave a little piteous cry and buried herself deeply on his breast.

IX

THE MAN WITH THE CUDGEL

"I WILL say nothing to you, Mave, not a word, my heart's darling. You shall think it all out for yourself; review the whole situation for yourself, Mave. I will not say a word to you," whispered Robert, in a low tone charged with tears.

His task was difficult. Mave clung to him with such devotional predilection; indeed, trusted him with her very soul. But Love had not made Mave a woman for nothing, and she must learn that in those gloomy vaults, where Love's tired wings go flitting around Time's immortal prisoner, Pain, the very stones are grey with sacrifice. At the outset of loving she must make sacrifice and learn—if she would know Love the verity—to cherish that sacrifice as the first flowers cast by her into fires of eternal immolation. She clung to Robert, her body thrilling with convulsive tremors. She drew herself up to him, raised her head until her eyes, reddened by weeping, were on a level with his and their lips touched. Mave remained thus for some considerable time, hot tears falling from her eyes and sliding unnoticed down her cheeks, whilst Robert, holding her to him, felt the swell and tempest in her soul die down remorsefully, until at last her breast, that nourished so much tumult, was becalmed.

"Robert, dear Robert, you must go," she whispered; "it is quite plain that you must go."

"Darling Mave, you see that now?"

"Oh yes, I see it," she responded a little wearily.

"There is nothing else for me to do, Mave."

"No, nothing else. . . . O God, what will become of *me?* What is there left for me? What can I do now?"

"Mave, Mave, hush! I shall return soon, dear one. It is but a matter of a few weeks."

"It is so long."

"I shall return soon, Mave. You do not, my child, my precious one, you do not doubt that I shall return?"

Mave gazed at him incredulously, then shook her head.

"Doubt you, Robert! My Robert! I should die if I doubted you. I should, Robert, I should. If I doubted you I should die."

"I know my Mave could not doubt me. It was wicked of me to harbour such a thought."

"It is not that, Robert. It is being from you."

"A few weeks."

"Yes, yes, only a few weeks, Robert, but so long. You must return soon, Robert. You have taught me so much, shown me so much. I shall feel so cold and lonely now without you. Everything seems so different now. . . . O God, what *will* become of me?"

Indeed, this matter of safe harbouring Mave until his return from London must engage Robert's immediate attention. The child, his betrothed, his sweet dream-bride, must be cherished in some rose-flowering sanctuary, and fed on all things blessed; be there preserved inviolate until he return. During

his absence from her side his very entrails would be devoured daily, Promethean fashion, by starving terrors, did he not know her to be secure, enshrined with warm spices, suckled on plenty, but prison-walled from the world. He must haste to London alone, see his uncle, arrange his fortunes and return for Mave. She could not share his journey. The Trayners, especially the Clarke contingent, must never hear of her existence. Did they do so it would lend a fine flavour to their scandalous tongues, that wagged so assiduously in Uncle William's ears, and spell financial ruin. Besides, now that William was ill, Peter the detestable must have charge of all affairs, and the advent of Mave into the family circle could not be considered for a moment. He could not, therefore, present her at his uncle's house; and as for leaving her in a London inn, he knew sufficient of the town to dismiss that notion as soon as it flitted into his mind. It was likewise impossible for her to remain in her present quarters under the care of the Meffs. An inn was an inn all the world over; nothing more nor less than a huge sieve, through which trickled daily all manner of muddy human currents, which were calculated to spoil all and sundry that came their way with adhesive corrodings. Besides, Robert knew his landlord class well, and he would not abandon Mave to the hospitable care of John Meff and family. Whilst he, the generous guest, remained, no situation could be better, but Mave alone—no! Robert was sufficiently versed in the habits of the landlord class to dismiss this idea as peremptorily as he had done the former notion of Mave staying at an inn in town. . . . Heavens! where was he to find the white rose-bush wherein to nestle his poor dove! . .

There was Mosely, of course. Mosely, for a consideration, would care for Mave, and his wife would wait upon her hand and foot; but then there were few things in this world that Mosely would not do for a consideration. And the man carried such an atmosphere with him, his presence alone was enough to turn a church into a gaol-box, he seemed to pollute one's own thoughts and actions. Certainly the last person to undertake the care of Mave. But who remained? Having considered John Meff, the London inns, and Mr. Mosely, Robert appeared to have expended his full resources. A return to the ribbon-shop and Miss Emma Wardale, with her screamings and eccentric passions, was out of the question. What did remain? Only the parson, who was all snuff and gruntings. Verily the prospect seemed blank indeed.

"Mave, dearest, tell me, is there any one you know who, before we met, ever showed you a single kindness?"

"Yes, one person, so I am told," she answered, looking up at him in surprise.

Robert confessed to his inmost heart a twinge. He would rather she had been quite friendless, quite world-neglected before he met her, so that every little tender office she had known came from his hands. He thought the twinge base, but confessed it.

"Who is this one person?" he asked, without enthusiasm.

"I do not know him myself, Robert, but he did me a great kindness, so Mrs. Hallowes used to say, and I am sure he meant it for a kindness when I was quite a babe. His wife used to come to Miss Wardale's. You saw him there once with her, Robert."

"You mean——"

"Mr. Deacon."

"Mr. Daniel Deacon?"

"Yes, Robert."

"The man who prevailed on Mrs. Hallowes to take you into her cottage?"

"Yes, yes, dear Robert, but how did you know that?"

Robert flushed uneasily, remembering how the information had come to his knowledge through the medium of Mr. Mosely's personal reminiscences. He did not answer Mave's question, but she was too far obsessed in the thought of imminent parting to push any single line of conversation to extremity. . . . Now that Mr. Deacon's name had been mentioned, Robert's difficulties had partially cleared. Deacon and his lady were notoriously patrons of the virtues, had earned an enviable reputation for philanthropic works, and moreover had already displayed an especial interest in the case of Mave. It must be admitted that the present turn of affairs were somewhat remarkable, and would demand explanation; but a man of Mr. Deacon's character, charitable in word and deed, would be disposed with the eye of benevolence to look upon the matter in its true and harmless aspect. Besides, from what rumour said of Mr. Deacon, it was likely that did he even have cause to suspect Robert's absolute good faith in the matter, his natural goodness of heart would rather give Mave house-room beneath his roof than abandon her to the inclemencies of the world. At any rate, Mr. Deacon offered a possibility. Mr. Deacon must be interviewed without delay.

"Mave, darling, I am thinking how you would like to stay under the care of Mr. Deacon until I return," said Robert, fondling her hair.

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She did not seem to quite grasp the drift of his meaning at first, so he repeated the question.

"Oh, well enough, Robert," said she, on a lingering sigh, and drawing back her arms.

"You would be safe with him, Mave."

"Yes."

"And well cared for."

"And well cared for, Robert."

"And I shall not be long away, sweetest."

"Oh no, Robert, you will not be long from me, will you? You do promise not to be long?"

"I promise, Mave, child, for my own sake as much as for yours. This parting is hard for me, quite as hard as it is for you, Mave."

"Not quite, Robert; almost, perhaps, but not quite."

She had slipped down from his embrace and sat crouching against his knees before the fire. One of the candles on the table had spluttered out, and the room was in semi-darkness. But the ruddy glow from the fire played upon the face and arms of Mave, and showed her face expressive of naught but exceeding weariness. Now and again, as when Robert spoke of his speedy return, the tears fell, but as a whole she remained quiet. . . . Robert was fast constructing his immediate plans. Primarily a visit must be paid to Mr. Deacon, and the case put before him in all its several bearings. His attitude towards the matter must be soberly sounded. Nothing could be finally determined until affairs had been carried to this juncture, and for such transaction there was no hour so propitious as the present. Robert was on foot at once.

"I must go see Mr. Deacon now, Mave," said he. "The sooner everything is arranged, the sooner I

leave for London—you understand—and the sooner I return to my Mave."

"Yes, Robert."

"I shall not be gone an hour, child."

"No, Robert."

"You will be safe here?"

"Of course, Robert."

"Eliza will sit with you."

"If you please, no, Robert. I have no need of Eliza."

"You would rather be alone, my dear one?"

"Yes, I would now, I think, rather be alone."

He stooped and kissed her, held her to his heart long and passionately, clung to her, indeed almost wept with her; for they were both so simply minded, so mutually dependent upon one another for heart's ecstasy and blissful tremors, that with every kiss, in the poor hyperbole of love, they made exchange of souls, whilst such business as the present, entailing a temporary absence from each other's eyes, seemed fraught with an abysmal distress only consequent to ordinary mercurial beings upon an eternal parting. Robert tore himself from the heart clutch of that embrace. Then, even then, when he was at the door, Mave pleaded to be kissed again. . . . Somehow he managed to grope his way from the parlour, requisition Trip and a stable lad into his service, spring into the saddle and go clattering out of the yard into the hollow darkness of the night. He had asked Trip the locality of Mr. Deacon's residence, and had received a superabundance of more or less explicit directions, but for all these he was constrained to ride slowly, feeling quite adventurous amidst the sharp twists and turns of the open country roads. A bleared moon was drifting in vaporous greys

through cloudy heavens, and Robert, quick as ever to reflect in mood his surroundings, felt unashamed, being alone and of small stature when self-seen, crawling beneath the sullen magnificence of storm-brooding night, to weep over his parting from Mave. But, as is the way with youth, much of the sterner bitterness in his heart evaporated when the tears were let spring, and he grew, having ridden the best part of an hour, tranquillized; serenely tempered as to the present sorrow, and cheerful with hope for the future, when he should rejoin Mave in such state as allows of no partings save those of death. He was proceeding now through a thickly wooded plantation and saw the moon, escaped from her vapours, shine large and white through the soft shake and rustle of the trees. Surely an omen of good fortune, he being now but a stone's-throw from the house of Mr. Deacon according to the explicit directions of honest Trip. He passed through the plantation and came upon further wooded copses threaded by dark paths and tangled tracts of undergrowth, but nowhere could he descry the habitation of the man whom he designed for Mave's immediate protector. Robert had reined in his cob and was beginning to doubt whether, after all, the night's enterprise would be prosecuted to a successful issue, when he suddenly saw a low light swinging amongst a clump of gorse bushes at some distance. Evidently a traveller, adventuring home with some difficulty, by aid of lantern. Robert hallooed loudly and flourished his whip, and at the third call the lantern began to caper and hop over the bushes. Presently a man showed above the lantern, and he came stumbling forward at the run, waving a stout stick in one hand whilst the lantern clattered in the other. Robert gripped his saddle

bows and prepared for the eventuality of combat; and the man, pulling himself up by the nose of Robert's horse, unceremoniously gripped the rein and by light of lantern scanned the rider's features. The fellow was a man of tremendous physique, tall, square-built, and big boned, with a coarse, brutal face and fierce, brutal eyes that glowed beneath a round fur hat pulled down upon his brows.

"Where the devil am I?" inquired Robert, tapping the saddle with his whip, and smiling pleasantly at the stranger.

"In a plantation, mister," answered the other, releasing the horse.

"Good, I am a traveller in these parts, my man. I want to find Mr. Daniel Deacon's house. Can you direct me?"

"I can."

The man stuck a broken clay pipe into the corner of his mouth, and falling back three paces from the horse, threw his cudgel into the air and caught it again. He repeated this performance several times and seemed oblivious to Robert's presence.

"My man, that's a very diverting trick of yours, but I asked you just now if you could direct me to Mr. Daniel Deacon's," said Robert, pushing his horse forward.

"I answered you," replied the man, falling back another three paces without interrupting the performance.

"You said, 'I can direct you.'"

"I said naught o' the sort."

The man flung his cudgel up to an extraordinary height and caught it, grunting satisfaction at his own dexterity.

"Well, I ask you again, friend, can you put me

on my way to Mr. Deacon's?" asked Robert, curbing his temper.

"I can."

"Does that mean, my fine fellow, that you can but won't?"

"Naught o' the sort."

"Well, will you direct me then? Come, put up that stick. I can't waste the night arguing with you. Will you put me on my way to Mr. Deacon's?"

"That depends, young fly-away."

"Depends! On what?"

"Coin, my fine spark, coin out o' your pocket."

The man ceased his curious exercise now, and regarded Robert with the deepest interest. Robert thrust a hand into his breeches pocket, and the man's face grew strained. Robert leant out of his saddle and carefully dropped three silver pieces into the palm of a large square-knuckled hand, remarkable for a pair of split and twisted fingers. The man counted and jingled the coins greedily, threw them high, saw them flash in the moonlight, caught them again, and pulling off his fur hat thrust them into the lining.

"No more?" he asked, in a tone of husky surprise.

"I'll see you farther first, my friend," answered Robert, twirling his whip.

"Well, Mr. Deacon's house a'n't two hundred yards from hereabouts. See that copse? T'other side. Two gates and a garden in front.

The fellow turned without vouchsafing a word of parting salutation, and, jumping over briar and bush, broke into a curious run through the plantation which Robert had lately traversed. Robert did not trouble to give more than a thought to his curious guide. He sprang lightly from his saddle, grasped

the cob's head, and leading the animal, skirted the edge of the copse until he came to two high iron gates, with a long bell-pull on their left and an old rain-washed milestone on the other side. Robert glanced up at the high tree-sheltered walls, and, peering through the gates, saw a long, unkempt, weedy garden, the grasses tall and uncut, and the one path muddy, dank and rain-puddled—a very desolation of humid waste. The gates were rusty, the crowning spikes twisted and in parts broken, and the surrounding walls were mildewed, lichen-grown, and fungus-covered. The house itself, rising in mournful grandeur from the midst of this desolate prospect, was square built of grey stone and stoutly buttressed. The windows, only in two of which could Robert discern a light, and then but a faint glimmer, were mullioned, and the topmost ones fenced in with iron bars fashioned like a cage. The aspect of the building was funereal in its gloom, the central pile being supported by a number of irregularly built outhouses. Thin smoke oozed slowly from an enormous chimney-stack. Robert tugged stoutly at the bell-pull, and the harsh metallic clang set his nerves on edge. Presently feet came pattering down the garden path, splashing in the puddles, and one of the gates was drawn back with much creaking. Robert was faced by a little, white-haired manservant, of the most diminutive proportions. He could not have stood above five feet high, but his limbs, despite their dwarfish stature, were modelled in perfect symmetry. He carried a lantern, like the Man with the Cudgel, and as he held it up to scrutinize the outward character of the visitor the flickering light played upon his features and showed them to be apple-rounded, smooth, of cheerful hue, and extraordinarily youthful.

It was almost the countenance of a well-grown child surmounted, through some fantastic humour of Nature's, by sleek, white hair.

"What's your bidding, sir?" asked the little white-haired manservant, whose name was Mathew, in a high piping voice.

"Is this the house of Mr. Daniel Deacon?" asked Robert, in reply.

"It is, sir."

"Is he at home, my good man?"

"He is, sir."

"Well, I desire to see him. Take him word that a gentleman from London asks the favour of a few moments' conversation with him on a matter of urgent importance."

"I will, sir. Pray step inside. Here, Tom, Tom, quick; come here and hold this gentleman's horse."

Mathew held the gate open for Robert's entry, whilst he turned his head and called up the garden to "Tom," who proved to be a lad—a distant connection of the ostler tribe. Leaving Tom in charge of the cob, Robert followed Mathew up the garden path towards the house. All the window curtains were drawn, but, as Robert had noticed before, faint lights glimmered in two of the rooms. Mathew gravely paused for Robert to precede him into a large square oak-rafted hall. Then motioning the visitor to a rough wooden bench, which constituted the hall's single piece of furniture, he departed in quest of his master. Robert had three minutes to take stock of his cheerless surroundings, and to note the intense silence that prevailed in Mr. Deacon's house. Not a sound was to be heard but the occasional shuffling of the cob outside the garden gates and the wind swishing the beech trees. This intense

silence froze somewhat the generous currents of Robert's enthusiasm. His mission, which had before seemed a light and easy matter to be arranged between two gentlemen of taste and discrimination, had suddenly swelled into an arduous and peculiar enterprise. However, he had had already a fleeting glance of Mr. Deacon's person in Miss Wardale's shop, and remembered with satisfaction that, in exterior parts at least, he was in no way terrifying or seemingly unapproachable. By this time Mathew was descending the stairs.

"Mr. Deacon will be pleased to see you," he said, pitching his high voice into as low a key as possible.

"Your hat and whip if you please, sir," he asked, extending his hands as Robert was making to ascend the stairs.

Robert handed them to him, and followed up the stairway, insensibly walking on tiptoe, and confessing to a nervous apprehension that his neckcloth was twisted awry. Mathew stopped on the first landing, destitute as the hall of pictures or adornments, and throwing open a stout, black oaken door, announced "The gentleman from London."

"Pray ask him to enter," answered a quiet, even voice. And Robert was ushered into the presence of Mr. Deacon.

He rose from his chair to greet Robert, who noticed that he was tall, but bent about the shoulders, and slender almost to an emaciated degree. This was far more noticeable than in Miss Wardale's shop, when he had worn a loose great-coat and low-crowned hat. His hair was sparse but long, straight, and of reddish hue, with here and there a sparkle of gold. His face was ashen, curved downwards almost to a

point, but lit by a pair of strong brown eyes that burnt with the hard brilliance of polished gems. He was clad in an ill-hanging suit of threadbare black, and his linen was worn and frayed. He gave Robert his hand and motioned him to a chair, his smile giving the young man's flagging spirits an invigorating fillip. The smile beautified the ascetic man's drawn features, lending him a kindlier grace of manner, and when Robert sat down he rested at perfect ease.

"One moment, sir," said Mr. Deacon, gathering up a sheaf of papers, and depositing them, with scrupulous care, in an open drawer which he shut and locked, thrusting the key into his waistcoat-pocket. He shifted his chair so as to face his visitor, and crossed his knees.

"I am at your service now, sir," said he, inclining his head.

"You have shown me great condescension, sir. Believe me, I am very sensible of your goodness of character," began Robert, collecting his thoughts.

"When we are better acquainted, sir, you will be able to pass judgment on my character," replied Mr. Deacon. "I see you are young, and given to rash conclusions."

"Your pardon, if I offended you, sir. I simply echoed what is common rumour."

"Rumour, as a rule, has a lying tongue, sir, but—— Well, well, let us to the business."

"My name is Robert Trayner, Mr. Deacon, and I am a member of a trading family in London."

Daniel Deacon carefully wrote the name down on a slip of paper.

X

THE PATRON OF THE VIRTUES

DANIEL DEACON paced the room uneasily. Robert, flushed by the warmth of his own eloquence, leant forward, and gazed into the face of his host. Would he consent, or had he determined to refuse? He had listened with such conciliatory gentleness to Robert's story, with such silent sympathy and intuitive understanding, that the young man could hardly think there would be a flat refusal. And yet the request was, as Mr. Deacon had said, in itself extraordinary, and without all precedent in the decent affairs of life.

"You must allow me a few moments' thought," said he, pacing the room. "I must look at this matter from all sides, out of justice to myself, sir. Your request is somewhat remarkable. The world, I am afraid, would not put a nice construction on your interest in this young person; but, be assured, that will weigh nothing with me. The world and I are not good friends, Mr. Trayner; we do our duty by each other, but no more. I give it my services as a magistrate—a most uncongenial avocation—and I think I have earned general respect, but apart from this, the world and I have no friendly dealings. I make war upon the world in the service of God, and it is the glorious heritage of God's servants to

suffer at the hands of the enemy. Blessed be our wounds!"

As Daniel Deacon spoke, zeal shone in his grey face, his voice rose and vibrated, and his eyes flashed. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead, and relapsed into a partial silence, muttering to himself—

"Let me think; let me think the matter out."

Daniel was intense in everything—in his speech, in his movements, in his smallest interests. He had a faculty of concentrating his entire mind upon any given subject, no matter of how trivial a description, and at this moment his every thought was focussed on the affair of Mave. Robert watched him, curiosity and admiration mingled in his heart. To a discriminating eye, the man could be seen at first sight a zealot, frail of body but vitalized by will. Properly judged, he presented a rather pitiable figure, as the struggle of the delicate constitution to support and contain the fever of the fervent spirit was always laboured and apparent. Robert did not interrupt the workings of his thoughts. He looked from Daniel round the square, formal apartment. It was lighted by candles, its hearth was fireless, its furniture severe, and the walls were lined with ponderous tomes. Daniel was the first to renew the conversation.

"I must state the case again for my own benefit," he said, "please correct me if I mistake the facts."

He paused before Robert's chair.

"In the first place, you met this young woman at Miss Wardale's?"

"Yes."

"You make no disguise of loving her?"

"It is my boast."

"Because her body is beautiful?"

"Because she is nearer to heaven than any human creature I have met before, or am likely to meet in the future."

Daniel nodded seriously. Humour is no part of the zealot, and he saw in Robert's words nothing of the poor hyperbole of love, but merely a plain statement of facts credible until gainsaid.

"The young woman then left Miss Wardale's."

"Yes."

"She was, I think you said, Mr. Trayner, left no choice in the matter, but was driven out at the hands of brutal violence?"

"Yes, that is so."

"Upon this, you having promised to befriend her, should occasion for such action arise, she claims your protection."

"Thank Heaven she did."

"I state the facts correctly."

"Perfectly."

"In proper sequence?"

"Exactly, sir."

"The young woman, you say, is honest?"

"I swear it."

"Innocent—unpolluted—a virgin?"

"Before God, I swear it. I pledge my honour."

"Very well, then, all you ask me to do is to safeguard her during your absence in London."

"Oh, Mr. Deacon," cried Robert, in whose conversation, now that he was a lover, the "Oh!" was generally manifest—"Oh, Mr. Deacon, if you will do this! If you will only grant me this favour! I have no words in which to express my gratitude, but Heaven will bless you, sir."

Daniel sat down once more in his chair.

"Make your mind easy, sir," said he, "I have thought the affair well out, and I accede to your request. I will look after this young person until you return from London. I will say now that I believe in the honesty of your story, Mr. Trayner, and I make no doubt you have done nothing more than impose upon me a pleasant duty."

Tears stood in Robert's eyes. He leant forward and grasped Daniel's hand, and when he spoke his voice shook with glad emotion.

"I cannot thank you enough," he stammered. "God alone can reward you for your goodness."

"God will reward us all, Mr. Trayner, according to our deserts."

"Yes, yes; but this is no ordinary kindness. The favour I asked was so extraordinary, coming from an utter stranger. I feel overwhelmed by your goodness. I will try and prove worthy of it. Of course—of course I will pay for the child's entertainment. You shall not be burdened by any extra expense."

Mr. Deacon smiled at the young man's eagerness to stand well in his sight, his desire to impress upon him his sense of gratitude, and his wish to engage honourably in the transaction, which were very evident. Robert, at this moment, was oblivious to the fact that his purse was of far too slender a build to allow of any further heavy disbursements.

"I shall not call upon you, sir, to provide for the young person's keep out of your private means," said Mr. Deacon. "She will stay here on the footing of a guest. I desire you say no more upon that matter."

"You will not allow me——"

"No, no; you must understand, Mr. Trayner, that I should never have entertained your proposal

did I not think you were reposing in me a sacred trust. This young person comes to me, I believe, innocent, unlettered, but pure of heart. It will be my duty to direct her natural virtues, whilst labouring to inform and improve the capacities of her intelligence. The fulfilment of my trust, Mr. Trayner, should constitute a reward in itself greater than you or this world have it in your powers to offer."

"Mr. Deacon, I hardly understand you. I appreciate your goodness—I do appreciate it—but—but—you surpass all—— Well, I can say no more. I do appreciate your goodness, but my heart is too full, and I cannot express what I feel. It would be absurdly inadequate to say that I am obliged for the service you have rendered me."

Mr. Deacon rested his thin hand on the young man's shoulder. A smile played on his lips, and his face was almost benign.

"I am doing you no service," he said gently, "we are strangers still, and I cannot be rendering you any favour for the sake of friendship. What I do is done by the orders of my Master, God Almighty, who commands me to stretch out my arm to rescue a young soul into safe keeping. I am but working the will of God in tending the flowers that spring from His seed."

"You are a most faithful servitor, Mr. Deacon. I can say no more."

Mr. Deacon made no answer to the compliment.

"Will you bring the young woman to me in the morning?" he asked.

"At your pleasure."

"In the morning, then. I suppose you know that I was in some little way instrumental in lodging her some years ago with a Mrs. Hallowes?"

"Oh yes, I have heard of your goodness in that matter."

"I should doubt, though, if the young person remembers it."

"You did God's work, then, Mr. Deacon."

"I pray that I may never enter into any other service. It is a good banner to fight under, Mr. Trayner. I beseech you think well before pledging your allegiance to any other cause. The cause of God offers us an eternal heritage of beatitude. The thing is to find the cause. Seek the cause, Mr. Trayner, and give our Almighty Father your full service."

Mr. Deacon continued at some length. Once engrossed on the one topic that filled his life—the eternal destiny of the human soul and its relationship to its Creator — he spoke without hesitancy, his thoughts transmuted by their very puissance into imagery of an exalted character. He could at times of spiritual exaltation be even sombrely impressive. Now he had clean forgot Mave, and discoursed to Robert on many conjectural hypotheses of his, and indeterminate equations; these not devoid of a certain romantic splendour with which, in his harassed yearning, he had coloured the gloomed vacuities that furnish sepulchres. Robert listened in sympathetic concern, catching something of the other's importunate earnestness. He felt moved by the sight of a man who had reached the middle of life engaged solely in the furtherance of saintly speculation. He saw the hot glow on the man's ashen cheeks, the glitter of his eyes; he heard the trill of the ecstatic voice, and felt himself incited to novel disorder. . . .

The object of his visit was not again referred to until the time had arrived for his departure. He

stood then on the threshold of the room holding Mr. Deacon's hand and stuttering forth, in broken accents, his great thanks for the service rendered and his lively appreciation of the late communing discourse, over which it was his purpose to deeply ponder.

"Till to-morrow morning, then, farewell, Mr. Trayner," said Daniel. "Bring the young person to me to-morrow, in the morning. Good night. God keep you."

Daniel shook the boy's hand and returned into his room. Robert was conducted by Mathew down into the garden and assisted into the saddle of the now sorely fretting cob. He offered some silver to Mathew and the boy, who had been all this while holding the cob's head; but it was refused, as Mr. Deacon allowed his servants to accept no favours. The cob, impatient at the prolonged halt, started off at a brisk canter, and his rider, nothing loth, urged him to a gallop.

"What a man!" exclaimed Robert aloud to himself. "What a man! The servant of God in very truth; one who has no thought for himself, but all for the good of others. How safe will Mave be under his care! How tenderly guarded and watched! What a man!"

He rode back into the inn yard and gave the sweating cob over to Trip who, since Robert's arrival in the market town, had assumed the office of groom, ostler, and general servant to that young gentleman. Robert inquired if Mave and Eliza were in bed, and was surprised to hear that Mave had not as yet moved from the private parlour. He went there and found the girl crouching, almost as he had left her, by the ashes of the now dead fire. She gave a little cry at his entrance, and, struggling up into his arms

folded him in fond embrace. Her lips were dry and there were no tears in her eyes, for she had been nursing her sorrow in temperate quietude, and was meek.

Robert told her all that had befallen since his departure, dwelt long in panegyric upon Daniel Deacon, and asked her to take some slight comfort in the assurance of unendangered comfort during his absence in London. Mave smiled wanly. Robert came near to breaking down again, so evident to his eyes was the grieving perturbation, although surface lulled, in her brooding heart. To prevent this, to obviate sudden womanish collapse, he prattled away with a fine assumption of careless bravery about all the various small incidents attending his visit to Mr. Deacon's. He touched largely on encountering the Man with the Cudgel in the plantation. He hoped thus to divert Mave's thoughts, and for the first time, indeed, the girl's concern did actually seem engaged from the prospect of the farewell. She listened breathlessly and her lips quivered. Robert's powers of narration lessened.

"My Mave! Mave, sweetheart, you are frightened. Tell me, what is the matter?"

"No, I am not frightened. Only I must know about this man. Was he tall?"

"Taller than I am, Mave. A tremendous fellow, with great square shoulders."

"Oh, Robert, tell me, did he look fierce . . . his eyes, I mean?"

"Yes, fierce and brutal. Why, Mave, you are shuddering, child!"

"And he wore a round fur hat?"

"Yes, pulled down over his brows."

"Robert, I know this man. I have met him."

"You know him! Mave, darling, how can you know this man? Think, child."

She was frightened by a terrifying remembrance and closed her eyes. Robert's astonishment was now tempered with anxiety.

"You have met this fellow, my Mave?"

"Yes, Robert."

"Where?"

"In this town."

"Long ago?"

"No."

"When then, child? I am all anxiety, Mave."

"That night . . . that night I was driven out . . . when you found me nigh senseless, in the rain, outside your door."

Robert reeled, as the incident, which Mave had recounted to him, of her meeting on that fateful night with a drunken persecutor, was recalled to his mind. And he had met the ruffian face to face. The man had been in striking distance of his riding-whip. . . . If he had known! . . .

"Mave, do you mean that he was the man who caught you in his arms?" he whispered.

"Yes, Robert."

"Who pressed his cursed lips to yours; who kissed you?"

"Yes."

"Who bruised you?"

"Yes."

"O God, why did I not know? If I could only have struck him dead at my feet I should have been happy then; I should have rejoiced. I swear it, Mave; I should have been happy if I could have seen him dead!"

She was frightened at the vehemence of his

passion, which whitened his lips and set his limbs a-tremble. She was frightened, yet secretly conscious of a wild thrill in knowing a wrong done to her could rouse such wrathful turbulence within his being.

"Oh, Robert! You would have been happy? Dear Robert, think."

"Yes, happy; I should have been happy, I say."

"Robert, I would not have my love cruel."

"Cruel! Mave, I would not have my sacred love touched by the filth of the highways."

"Let us forgive, Robert," said Mave, rather primly.

"Forgive! I will try and forget, but forgive never!"

The thought of Daniel Deacon came to him then. Daniel Deacon would have said, though the heart's inviolable sanctities be profaned and tarnished, forgive freely and thereby glorify God and make perfect the soul, to the attainment of which end one must render subservient all heart shrines and earthly altars. Daniel Deacon's creed was of hard structure and difficult in practice. Verily Daniel Deacon was a great man!

The clock striking a late hour broke a lengthy silence. Mave was ruffled, and raising her head burst out into a gust of weeping.

"Child, child, why do you weep so? Oh, Mave, darling, be not so very unhappy!" cried Robert.

"The night is nearly past," said she, looking up at him with quivered face and tear-filled eyes. "Morning will soon be here, Robert. We part in the morning. Oh, Robert, in the morning!"

XI

THE DEPARTURE

THE reckoning had been paid at the inn, followed by generous leave-takings with John Meff, his wife and Eliza. Boxes had been packed and bundled into a chaise. Mave, wan but tearless, was seated next to Robert, who, silent and subdued, paid little heed to Trip's garrulous commentaries on honesty and liberty, delivered as the old jockey executed his final service for his departing friend and patron by driving him and Mave to Mr. Deacon's house. Trip drove smartly through the crisp morning air, whilst the green woods, swaying in the wind's delight, shook off their dews and throbbed with song. Morning was here; morning, live, fresh and stimulating; morning such as had intoxicated the young blood of Robert Trayner on the day he walked into the ribbon-shop and met Mave. But to-day Robert's moods were energized by forces antithetical to the external beauties of nature. He was absorbed in the parting pierced by the bitter poignancy of the moment; feeling Mave's soft hand in his, and all her fair breathing warmth alive and palpable by his side, yet knowing that the passing of a few hours would leave him solitary. Now that he had known the peace and rapture instilled by Mave's presence he would be, when denied its consolation, doubly alone. Somewhat an over-statement of the case it seems! How

absurdly inadequate were such emotions when we bethink they were engendered by a prospective parting of but a few weeks duration. Yet the heart of youth must be of slow pulse if it cannot mould its own eternities, see all creation crumbling in the dissolution of a deceitful dream, and compress into momentary periods of time immeasurable sweet sorrows and bitter joys. So Robert hated the blithe morning, feeling that on such occasion it should be sable-hung and sunless, and held a grudge against the green singing woods because they pæaned hope and all things blessed, whereas they should have found utterance in naught but dirge, solemn and harsh funereal measures. . . . Mave pressed Robert's arm.

"Let us stop here, dearest," she whispered.

"Stop, Mave! Why, we are still nearly half an hour's walk from Mr. Deacon's."

"That is why I ask you to stop."

"Why?"

"To say good-bye."

"Mave! Oh, darling, what can you mean? Say good-bye!"

"Yes, I cannot say good-bye at Mr. Deacon's amongst strangers, nor here before Trip. Let us walk a little way into the woods."

He could deny her nothing at this moment, and at once stopped the chaise. Trip was ordered to wait a few minutes until they returned, and then, arm-in-arm, walking with great decorum over the smooth springy sward, flowered and dew-gemmed these two unhappy young souls passed into the darker shadows of the heavy foliaged trees. When there, quite hidden from the roadway with Trip and its chance travellers, Mave gave way and, clinging to

the breast of Robert, sobbed out the burden of her heart.

"Mave—listen to me, Mave—it is only for a few weeks, heart's darling."

"Robert—O God, how I love you, Robert! Robert, I am afraid."

"There is nothing to fear; do believe that darling, nothing to fear."

"I *am* afraid. I will not lie, I will not pretend. I am afraid that I am parting from you for ever. Robert, come back to me, come back."

The cry came shuddering up from her heart's depths, and to Robert's ears sounded, in its low despairing burden, like the world-old sob that is ever hidden in the bosom of the seas.

"Come back to me—I love you so much, only come back to me, as you love God, come back and make me happy."

She was quite white to the lips, drawn by the ache within her breast, and numbed.

"I will come back—I swear it. Oh, how foolish this is! How could I live without you—now?" cried Robert.

"And I?"

She drew back, heaving deeply, and stared at him, her eyes glazed; but he held her fast.

"And I?" she said, "Could I live now? Think—could I live now?"

"Mave, I shall come back—may—may the Heaven strike me dead as I stand, if it is not true—I shall come back for my own, for my Mave."

"It would be cruel if you did not—if God prevented you—nothing else could, I know."

"Nothing—nothing."

"It would be cruel, after you have loved me and

made me love you so much, Robert. Made me give you all my heart—drawn everything from me. It would be cruel, wouldn't it? You should never have loved me, Robert, never have made me like this, never—never—if you couldn't return. Do you know how I love you? No; it is impossible. I can't tell you, dearest, only I live in you—you—you who are all my life."

She unlocked her hands and pressed them, wet with tears, upon his cheeks, and drew his lips down to hers; and Robert, all the stern qualities of boasted manhood dissolved, cried in that kiss like a whimpering child, so that they rocked together, lost to all restraint, and weeping wildly in bitter desolation of heart and spirit. He felt her warm hair on his face, tears upon it; he felt tears slip from her eyes on to his cheeks, and, growing maddened, drew on her lips until they were white and tingling.

"Mave, I must go—I can't bear this, Mave. Oh, these poor tears, let me kiss them, Mave—they are sweet, Mave—Mave, my heart's own, it is killing me—this parting is killing me. Come close to me, dearest—don't flutter so, poor heart—come close, press on me."

They pressed their burning cheeks together so that their wet eyelids touched and flickered. They had reached finality in sorrowful expression, and having stammered so prodigally, felt exhausted after vain ineffectual endeavours to articulate emotions unutterable in the smaller compass of windy speech, so that it were wiser to squander no further confidence in such intrepid labours after verbal emissions of the ineffable, but to make an end.

"Come back, Robert."

"I shall return, my own Mave."

Mave trimmed herself into some semblance of decent order, imprisoning a wayward tress in a ribboned constraint, and, drying the tangled lashes of her swollen eyes, they linked arms again and walked once more out into the garish vision of the world, fortunately represented in this case by the uncertain optic of honest Trip. In less than half an hour the chaise had drawn up before the gates of Mr. Deacon's house. Robert was astonished at the milder aspect of the place in morning light. All the fearsome mystery had vanished from the plantations, now vivid with verdant greens and opened blossoms. But the old grey lichen-grown house and its dank, weedy gardens, still looked desolate and neglected. The white-haired Mathew hurried out in response to the bell, but before he had reached the gates Mr. Deacon stood himself in the doorway of the house, prepared to honour his visitors. Robert helped Mave to alight. He led her slowly up the garden path. Her arm trembled in his, and her lips were pale, but firmly compressed. Daniel Deacon, in the doorway, extended his hand to Robert, and exhibited every sign of cordiality.

"A fine morning, Mr. Trayner; I have been expecting you the last half-hour."

"I trust we have not put you to any inconvenience."

"None, Mr. Trayner, none. Pray come in. Is this the young person?"

He hardly gave a glance to Mave, who was presented with much stateliness by Robert, as "Miss O'Moran, who I trust before long will be Mrs. Trayner." Only a few days ago he would have shrunk from the profanity of thinking of his woodland naiad as Mrs. Anything; but the goddess had

tended into the woman and "Mrs. Trayner," as a term, offered him greater security of his treasure than "Mave of the Woods." Mr. Deacon conducted his guests into a large room looking out upon the gardens, furnished as a drawing-room, but bare of small comforts and the homely air of domesticity that can at times make even the most regal apartments endurable. Seated in the window niche was a comfortable, middle-aged woman, in a high, stiff gown, a basket of woolwork resting at her side. She turned as Daniel ushered his visitors into the room, and Robert saw that she was his host's wife, the lady whom he had seen at Miss Wardale's. She looked up without any apparent interest at the strangers, and continued her woolwork. Robert was struck by the placidity of her face, high-boned, smooth and pinkish in colour, and the perfect tranquillity of her lustreless brown eyes. A quiet woman she appeared, enjoying a tolerable plenitude of the earth's blessings; one equably meandering through level pastures in urbane contentment. The woman was staid, sensible, but lacking in vivacity. An excessive emotion in her presence would have constituted an impropriety; a transport would have been indecent.

"My wife, Mrs. Deacon — Mr. Trayner," said Daniel, presenting Robert to the lady, who rose, bowed graciously enough, and continued on her woolwork.

Mave, timorous and retiring, was next presented.

"This, Barbara, is Miss O'Moran, the young person whom I have taken under my protection until Mr. Trayner returns from London. I have, I think, fully explained the circumstances of the case to you, my dear. Mr. Trayner purposes on his return to take Miss O'Moran as wife."

"Is she the young person from the ribbon-shop?" asked Mrs. Deacon, in an expressionless voice.

"The same."

"I am sure she is very welcome. Will you be seated, Miss O'Moran, and be good enough to hold my wool?"

Mave advanced shyly, and sitting down at some distance from Barbara Deacon in the window-seat, held the wool; she glanced furtively at Robert, who was nervously twirling his hat and preparing a speech for the benefit of Mr. Deacon and his wife.

"I hope we put you to no inconvenience, madam?" he said, bowing to Barbara.

"Oh, none at all, Mr. Trayner. I am always pleased with my husband's arrangements," she answered.

Was the woman sincere? She showed neither annoyance nor lively pleasure. She appeared perfectly neutral in the matter. Mr. Deacon touched Robert's arm.

"I should be obliged for a word with you in private," he said. "I suppose you wish to be hurrying to London, but a few minutes will suffice for all I have to say."

"Certainly, Mr. Deacon; I am at your service."

"The garden will serve our purpose, Mr. Trayner. Kindly follow me."

Robert, in some wonderment as to the cause of this private conversation, walked out into the gardens, where the sunlight was dappling the long grasses and shimmering in the rain pools. Mr. Deacon straightened his long hair and coughed. The ashen hue of his cheeks and the remarkable brilliance of his glinting eyes struck Robert as even more extraordinary this morning, when seen in the full sunshine,

than on the previous night when shadowed by the cold half lights of his monastic study.

"I want to speak to you, Mr. Trayner, about the subject of our discourse last evening," he said with serious emphasis.

"Pray proceed, Mr. Deacon," answered Robert, his whole thoughts centred on Mave.

"Perhaps you have pondered my words since I saw you?"

"I have, Mr. Deacon," replied Robert, uncertain as to what portion of his discourse Mr. Deacon particularly referred.

"Have you decided to serve under the banner?" he asked abruptly.

"The banner?"

"The banner of my Master, God Almighty?"

Robert was confounded.

"I trust I shall serve in no other cause, Mr. Deacon."

The zealot shook his head, and his strong white teeth flashed in a smile.

"That's not enough, Mr. Trayner, not enough. I have heard the same from a dozen mouths, but nothing came of it ever—nothing."

He spoke bitterly, clasping his thin hands together in an ecstatic gesture.

"A firm resolve will only serve your purpose, Mr. Trayner—a knowledge that you have been washed clean in the blood of the world's Redeemer. Take the plunge, my young friend, make the resolve; use your life in cultivating virtue."

"Virtue is not God," said Robert, astounded to find himself drawn into an argument on the attributes of the Divinity at such time.

Mr. Deacon gripped his arm.

"You mistake," he cried, setting his teeth; "virtue alone matters. By virtue we attain God: nothing else is of account to us. The principles of virtue are the laws of God. Jesus Christ was the most virtuous of men."

The tone of Daniel's speech sounded profane to Robert, and, to characterize the God of Sorrows as "the most virtuous of men," pointed to Mr. Deacon being a theomachist, and although Robert was liberal in politics, he was, as has before been insisted on, bred of stout Church-going stock, and was easily shocked at Gallic blasphemies.

Mr. Deacon continued.

"Jesus Christ was as much a man as you and me. He became literally the Son of God by the virtue of His life. He is an example of incarnate virtue, and as such He is as much the world's Redeemer to me as to the parson at yonder church, who dishonours his cloth by all manner of ungodly pastimes—hunting, fishing, shooting—all life-killing sports, please observe, but whose profession it is to believe a superstition engendered in ages of darkness and ignorance."

"You surprise me very greatly, Mr. Deacon—you surprise me."

"I am glad of it—glad of it, sir. Ponder on your way to London over what I have said. Remember that Jesus Christ was born a man and became a God through the practice of virtue. Remember that virtue is God Almighty's magic by which creatures of sin migrate into angelic state. Remember, as I told you only last night, that the individual soul may pass from man at any moment when the body no longer offers a fit habitation for it. Thus you see no soul is lost to its Creator, but that many men, soulless and

brutish, writhe eternally in hell fire. Strive to preserve your soul, Mr. Trayner, that you may enjoy it for infinity. I have no more to say. I have done my duty. On your return from London, I trust that you will have already enlisted under my Master's banner. God keep and preserve you."

He grasped Robert's hand and shook it with exceeding warmth. A clammy sweat broke out constantly on his brows, and he smoothed his temples with a large white handkerchief. He preceded Robert back to the house, muttering the while to himself. Robert regarded his strange figure, slight, angular, and bent, almost with pity. What crack-brained creed fermented in that addled intellect so deeply engaged upon the elucidation of flatulent theorizings? These in themselves, when considered by an equitable mind, at once seem to be contradictory and absurd. And yet truly he was a man of virtue, a worker of good deeds, a dealer in benevolence, and as such was entitled to an honest man's esteem.

When they again reached the morning-room they found Mave and Mrs. Deacon seated in precisely the same positions as they had occupied before. Neither had moved; neither had spoken. Barbara Deacon was intent on naught but her woolwork, whilst Mave held the worsted ball and sat motionless as a statue, staring with troubled eyes at distant chimeras. Robert tried a few commonplaces, but neither Mr. Deacon nor his spouse were responsive.

"Hold the ball a little higher, if you please, Miss O'Moran," said Barbara, unnoticing a florid remark from Robert on the variability of the weather. "When I have finished this work, miss, you may as well be shown your room and take off your hat," continued she, after an awkward interval of silence.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Mave.

At this interesting juncture Mathew entered, bearing a tray on which were some biscuits, dry cake, and gooseberry wine. Mr. Deacon officiated at the table, handing round his simple fare with quiet gravity. Robert drank his wine and swore it was delicious, Mave and Mrs. Deacon sipped it delicately, whilst Mr. Deacon left his entirely untasted. Having accomplished his duties as host, one of his concessions to society, he had become absorbed in his customary abstraction. It was time now that Robert took his leave and, despite his full heart, he was at great pains to appear polite and gallant. He advanced, hat in hand, to Mrs. Deacon and made a little speech, extolling her kindness and hospitality, and repeated a similar heart-felt peroration to her husband. To this Mr. Deacon responded with a nod, but Barbara expressed a general satisfaction at affairs as they stood.

"I am sure I am very well pleased for Miss O'Moran," said she, still intent upon her variegated wools, "to be here. I shall be glad to see you on your return, Mr. Trayner."

Robert made her a profound bow and shook Mr. Deacon heartily by the hand. Mathew held the door open for him. He glanced furtively towards Mave and advanced, trembling in all his limbs. His quivering lips just touched her hand as he bade her adieu.

"Dear me, Miss O'Moran, you have dropped my ball."

"Good-bye, Robert," said Mave, recovering the woollen ball.

She leant back in the window niche and looked straight at her lover with tearless eyes. She was

composed in her demeanour, but her bosom thrilled with a great tumult.

The next moment Robert was groping his way along the garden path. He could not turn to wave a last farewell or blow a kiss to those formal windows, so he must needs depart without further sorrowful fanfare, huddled up in ungainly fashion by the side of Trip, who was driving him to a little town at some distance, where he might engage a coach seat to London.

"Honest man, Mr. Deacon, if hearsay be true," remarked Trip; "but narrow, Mr. Trayner."

"He is a good man, Trip. I have never met a better, Trip."

"Narrow in mind, Mr. Trayner. The principles of liberty, which is dear to the hearts of all true, honest men, don't appeal to him, Mr. Trayner."

Robert made no answer.

"Not so much as a mug of ale in the whole house," said Trip.

Robert was silent.

"As for good strong spirits, I don't suppose as they ever heard of 'em," said Trip.

Robert leant out of the chaise and wiped a secret tear.

"Some day a body will die for want of 'em in that house as a judgment," continued Trip; "and there I think you agree with me, Mr. Trayner."

"Oh, my poor Mave; my poor little Mave," sobbed out Robert, involuntarily.

Trip, in general, a considerate and humane driver, thrashed the horse. He spent the rest of the journey in whistling stray tunes through the little circular hole bored between his two front teeth. Afterwards, when Robert had been safely lodged on

the front seat of the London coach, he expressed the opinion to an agreeably disposed ostler that love was the curse of humanity. Had he not seen the most generous of men ruined by its malign influence and rendered as mean as parsons? No man was safe from its entanglements. In witness of which statement he cited the instance of a pleasant gentleman who was now little better than mad Davy Deacon, but who had at one time actually ridden John Meff's grey mare up the High Street and back again.

The ostler professed incredulity, whereon followed a true and faithful narration of that wonderful ride. The ostler was impressed, having heard something of the story before.

"And the young man's spoilt?" said he.

"Spoilt—cracked," exclaimed Trip.

"Ah, love's a strange thing! What is love?" reflected the ostler.

"What is love? The start o' all aggrewations, I say. How did I get this limp, Tommy? Kicked by a filly, in the warm months. Don't talk o' love."

XII

THE BABY

A MONTH had passed, bringing no sign or word of Robert to Daniel Deacon's household. Mave maintained a brave front, but wept like a lost creature in the seclusion of her bedroom. She and Barbara had made no advances since her first entry into the house. They knew each other little better, and hardly ever exchanged a word except at meals. As for Daniel, his time was almost entirely occupied between meditations in his private room, long solitary walks, and the execution of his magisterial duties. Mave crept about the place like a frightened mouse. Everywhere she met decent respect, but no one had as yet uttered to her a single word or shown a mark of friendship. This distressed her, because being engrossed in love, she longed for affection and intimacy. Some one to whom she might confide bosom secrets, weep when she felt foolishly unhappy, and laugh with when dear remembrances occasioned excessive joy. Certainly Barbara Deacon was no such person. She had little conversation and a placid manner of habitual reserve. It was a difficult question to answer whether the woman owned a single viable interest in life. She invariably acquiesced in her husband's opinions, and when she did speak her remarks were customarily prefixed by "I am very well pleased."

Occasionally Daniel, severely harassed in his pursuit of duty, took his wife walking in the town, but on these occasions Mave remained at the house, as, considering her former position at Miss Wardale's, it was considered by Mr. Deacon to be imprudent for her to accompany them. Barbara was very well pleased that Mave should remain at home.

Life altogether dragged on an irksome course of uniform monotony. Mave arose, breakfasted, assisted Barbara with her wools or did some trivial service in the house. Tea was served at all hours, but dinner punctually at five. The food was of a Spartan plainness. In the evening there was neither music nor conversation, but now and again Daniel would read aloud out of ponderous books on Hebraic lore, or any speculative work that professed to deal with the ultimate destination of the human soul. With this entertainment Mrs. Deacon was always very well pleased, although she understood it hardly a whit more than Mave. She would sit, her hands calmly folded, in the huge cheerless room, bolt upright in her chair, making not the slightest movement until the reading was concluded. Mave often watched her as the candle-light played on her impassive features; a tranquil, soulless figure, without grace or animation. She appeared impervious to boredom, fatigue, or the bleak draught that whistled through the old house, stirring the carpets, sighing through the corridors, and chilling Mave to the bone. She would sit, vacant-eyed, at one end of the massive room whilst the wind ruffled and the candles flickered, oblivious of everything until silence told her that the reading was at an end.

Once Mave found herself asking the question whether Barbara was happy? Yes, tolerably so.

Her capacities were small; a transport was beyond her imagination. She was tolerably happy in that condition of life in which it had pleased Providence to place her. She had been married to Daniel as a girl, and was contented with her lot, but would probably have been equally contented in any other spouse, whether ploughboy or prince, and have done her duty by him with as scrupulous a rectitude as she observed towards Mr. Deacon.

Mave was not happy in such companionship. The hollow vastness of the environment numbed her. The hard rules of living imprisoned her natural enthusiasms. She was like a wild bird entombed in the narrow limits of an iron cage, who sheds its trills in piteous yearning after the warmth and freedom of a summer wood. There was not a moment in which she was not conscious of restraint. She fluttered desperately from point to point, but was always beating up against new obstacles. Still, one glowing thought illuminated the dreary cavern of her soul. Robert would return. Every hour brought him nearer to her. Always was this grey vigil drawing to a close in a vista of love fulfilled. She must be patient, because now was the hour of penitential probation, and she was being cleansed in bitter waters for love's embrace. She was always imagining Robert's return, the sudden clang of the bell, his hasty stride up the garden path, the clothes he wore, his first words, the moment of meeting with its dissolving rapture, the farewells to Daniel and Barbara, and, beyond all this, the broad stretching after life in smooth pastures. Such thoughts served to keep youth alive and valiant. They found no outlet in word or gesture, but consumed her inwardly, so that beneath her regular demeanour the heart smouldered

with intensive fervence. In her own room, large and cheerless, like all the apartments in this house, she made to herself secret confession. Through long nights she lay awake, aglow in the spacious warmth of her dreams. She was always rehearsing the meeting with Robert, swooning into his arms, dying away upon a kiss whilst all the tides of love gathered and broke upon her in one tremendous wave. In the cloister of this silent room she gave colour to life by play-acting, by imagining Robert to be with her. When the door closed, shutting out the Deacons and the inhospitable world for a brief period, she would at once act as though Robert were by her side. She would talk to him for hours.

"No, it is so cold, my dear Robert, let us shut the window," she would say; or, "Dear Robert, kiss me again;" or, "Dearest Robert, hold my hand;" or, "I think you are a little sad, Robert; I must kiss all your sadness away."

She slept always smiling, her lips parted pleadingly in the hope that she might be awakened by Robert's kiss.

Thus a month passed without sign or word of Robert, but still she had no fears. Any hour might bring him now, and Mave existed in a fluttered state of constant expectancy. Every morning broke in a vista of splendid promise; every night fell with a general sense of disappointment. But the girl was young, and the new dawn brought hope's renewal.

One would have imagined that under such conditions as the Deacon household offered her, nature would hardly expand or enlarge its capacities. One would almost have thought that, on the contrary, much of the honey would be sucked from her soul,

and that the fibres of her being would grow hard and barren. Such was not the case. Wild flowers bloom obstinately in the most uncongenial soil, at times even breaking forth between the pebbles of a city causeway; and Mave, true to her kind, was too self-centred, too profoundly engrossed in the world of her own bosom to take colour from her environment. To contemplate the strivings of her own mind; to suffer in quiescent solitude the blissful thrills of the heart that kindled in her breast, was the joy and the religion of her life. Solitude became to her a sacrament, and silence the grey wine of her soul, so that she was always scheming to be alone. The gardens were free for her to range, and she spent many hours here in communion with love. She had an affection for two old rain-washed statues in the gardens which were fast crumbling, and she had a fondness for straying beyond the rusty gates into the dark copses and wooded plantations that lay beyond. Mr. Deacon's house was the only human habitation for some miles round, and Mave found these rambles in woodlands solitary and undisturbed by mortal activities.

Once, however, she made acquaintanceship with a vagrant, his wife, and a new-born baby, who were camped by the roadside. It was at that time when her heart was suffering a vague ebullition of fear due to the protracted absence of Robert. And yet she would not admit to herself the existence of this secret dread, but at nights lay awake in hot sweats. Summer, with its slothful noons, its golden haze and liberal juices, was melting into the melancholy of autumn browns, and death went sighing through the air; the twilights gathered early, the moons grew large and red; the leaves went spinning in the wind's

way, and Mave imbued all nature with the mood of her new sorrow. Every moment now that she could steal was expended in woodland walks; she unconsciously found a poor solace in figuring herself leaf-strewn, wind-blown, heart-heavy, and alone, as a mournful bride of desolation.

It was in the faint luminous dusk of early morning that she saw the vagrant tending his wood fire by the roadside. A woman, bare-headed and enveloped in a tattered cloak, sat next to him, her face hidden. Mave, returning to Mr. Deacon's, was for passing the couple without notice, but the man looked up at her approach and called out to her—

"Young gentlewoman, we be poor people, and the wife just quit of labour. Spare a trifle of siller, young gentlewoman."

The man showed a set of fine white teeth, dark, thickly matted hair, and a swarthy complexion. His eyes were brown, his cheeks deeply scarred, and his nose broken. He wore ragged breeches, a torn flannel shirt, a pair of worsted stockings, and patched shoes; but his manner, for one of his class, was gallant. He neither whined nor bullied.

Mave stopped, and shook her head.

"I am very sorry, but I have no money, no silver, to give you," said she.

The man looked surprised, glanced at her curiously and smiled. He was almost handsome when he smiled.

"Would you give me a trifle if you had it, young gentlewoman?" he asked, with a waggish note in his voice.

"I would give all, I promise you. I would give you all, but I have nothing."

"Then you are worse off than us, young gentlewoman," said the vagrant, and he spun a copper coin in the air and laughed.

The woman by his side had not, as yet, raised her head. It was bowed almost to her knees, and Mave heard a curious sound, half-lisp half-sigh, coming from her bosom.

"What is that you have in your arms?" asked Mave, in the simple direct manner she used everywhere, save in the presence of the Deacons.

The woman stirred, raised her head, and looked at Mave suspiciously. She was somewhat of a hag, with a drawn face, large prominent black eyes, two front teeth gone, and a wave of unkempt, wispy hair. She drew the shawl closer round her, and spat in the road dust.

"What's that to you?" she asked, in a low gutteral voice, drawing a filthy hand, adorned with three brass rings, across her mouth.

Mave was abashed at the woman's bold eyes and defiant tones, and the man, quick to notice it, nudged his companion and laughed again.

"A natural!" he exclaimed, in an undertone, "harmless as a rabbit, but soft."

At that moment the wind caught the woman's shawl, and, blowing one of the flaps aside, showed her suckling a baby. The infant cried out at once, and the mother hastily pulled back the shawl and started to croon a lullaby. Mave did not remember having seen a babe at the breast before, at least, not since she had grown to womanhood, and the sight stirred her profoundly. The thought of children was quite new. She approached nearer to the woman, eager-eyed and tremulous.

"Is that a baby you have there?" she asked.

The woman appeared sulky.

"What else should it be, eh?"

"I don't know. Oh, will you let me see it? Please do!"

Mave had fallen to her knees on the roadside quite close to the vagrant's wife, and she looked squarely into her eyes, all eagerness and wonderment. The woman scrutinized her narrowly, and was mollified. After all, it was the most beautiful baby in the world, and it was hardly strange that a young gentlewoman should wish to feast her gaze on one of Nature's marvels.

"Is it the brat you want to see?" she asked, with a wintry smile.

Mave nodded excitedly, and, clasping her hands, watched the woman carefully pull back a corner of the shawl. Mave peered down at the suckling babe. It was rather red in colour, a light down on the head, its hands and feet delicately dimpled. Mave knelt like one transfixed by a sudden miracle. The movement of the babe's lips made her dizzy. She thought it the most ravenously beautiful object she had ever beheld, and wondered how it chanced that she had never before beheld the beauty of an infant. Already her own bosom felt cold and empty.

The man watched her wide-eyed interest in the babe, his amusement not untinged with pride. He tugged furtively at a wisp of straw between his teeth, and grinned in sheepish pleasure.

"He's a glutton for milk, that brat," he remarked, in a tone implying that, strange though it might seem, the baby owned its share of human faults.

As for the wife, she was growing very fond of Mave.

"A month old come to-morrow," said she, "and fine and healthy too."

"A glutton for milk, wife," put in the husband, with deprecatory emphasis.

Mave sighed deeply, and pressed her hands ecstatically to her heart.

"Oh, it is beautiful, more beautiful than anything I have ever seen," she exclaimed. "May I kiss it just once?"

"Here take the brat, and hold it awhile if you're so willing," said the woman. "I'm fair tired; it's been sucking at me for the last blessed hour."

Mave did not speak; she crouched down by the woman's side, and held out her arms. Her breast heaved, and her eyes sparkled.

"Do you know how it's to be held?" said the woman, with the caution of an afterthought.

Mave nodded, though in all her life she never remembered having held a young infant before, and the mother gave the babe, now drowsy and half-asleep, into her keeping. The woman soon saw that the girl trembled, and held but rudimentary notions on nursing children.

"That's not the way, bless my life, dear," said she, and straightway altered the posture of Mave's arms.

Mave stooped and kissed the babe. Colour came into her cheeks, and her eyes dimmed.

"Fond of brats, you be, young gentlewoman?' asked the father.

"Yes, I love them now. I didn't until I saw this one. How warm it is!"

The couple looked at one another, winked and laughed.

"Married you be, p'r'aps?" asked the father.

Mave shook her head.

"Got a fine gentleman that want's you to be his?"

Mave nodded over the baby.

Again the couple laughed.

"You'll be having a brat of your own soon, then, young gentlewoman, and mighty fond of it you'll be to be sure."

Mave looked at the man darkly and pondered his words. Yes; she would have a babe of her own. Her cheeks burnt scarlet. It would be Robert's babe. She would hand it to Robert—hand it to him as the most precious gift her love could offer. The vagrant tugged at his wisp of straw and grinned, whilst his wife lay back against the hedge, and smiled through half-shut sleepy eyes. The babe's tiny fingers clutched at Mave's gown and nestled close down to her, and again she felt faint, whilst her blood sprang up ebullient with heat. She shifted her position slightly, so that her flaming cheeks were obscured from the vagrants, and, with quick nervous fingers, loosened the body of her gown, and slipped the warm bundle of life into her naked bosom, and at the touch of the babe's lips, thirsting for the sustenance that sprang not from her virgin breasts, Mave shed the last remnants of her dream-childhood. She knew herself to be at last a woman, filled with a sacred craving for motherhood, and finally purged of girlhood's elusive deceits and meandering spirit journeys amidst moon-fed prospects of glamoured futurities. A woman, strong with vital needs, and possessed of hungry wants that would brook no self-dissimulation.

The vagrant peeped over his wife's shoulder at Mave, and, divining the girl's purpose in loosening

her gown, stared open-eyed, and burst into hearty laughter.

"Of all the rum starts I ever have seed, this beats all," he cried, slapping his thighs. "Wife, look at the young gentlewoman, look at her!"

Mave was simply surprised at the man's merriment.

"I shall do no harm," said she. "I want to feel what it is like to have a babe at the breast; I will not hurt it."

"If it pleases you, young woman, you are welcome," said the mother; "but it's not much food the brat will get."

"Ha, ha, ha! wife, that's good, ha, ha, ha!"

"I should like to be a mother," said Mave.

"When you get one o' your own, it won't be the first one you suckled, ha, ha, ha!"

The man slapped his thighs and snapped his fingers in high glee, but as Mave seemed quite serious and his wife sleepy, his humour slackened. He produced a slab of stale bread and some boiled bacon, and fell to eating, while his wife slept and the wind drove sparks and drift smoke from the crackling wood fire, and Mave, play-acting with the warm babe, gradually grown quiescent at the breast, felt that the evening was the peacefullest she had ever known.

She sat thus for more than an hour, watching the night flies swerve and buzz, whilst those sad half-lights, that do most subtly express all the tragedy and beauty of our world, faded through deepening gradations into a vasty darkness.

Both the vagrants slept now, worn and weary from the day's unequal conflict, and Mave, the slumberous infant soothing her soul and body, kept quiet vigil by the smouldering fire, indifferent to time

and all matters of social import, under spell of love magic. Sitting thus, she thought little, even of Robert. Her vision was not coloured nor her dreams vitalized. She arrived at no conclusions, suffered no mental processes, but was in mind, for that still hour, blank and submissive. In the shadows, without care for the ebb of such still moments, she remained transfixed and stationary, her eyes mild, like those of some dumb wounded animal whose pains have been suddenly eased by healing panacea. At last she awakened from the reverie and the hour's oblivion melted from her mind. She felt as though she had adventured far from the world into a spacious calm of dusk, and had for a time come to spiritual anchorage midst the cooling plash of even waters. It seemed that she had travelled an eternity from the Deacons and all her former life, apart from Robert, and she felt shaken from this precipitous swing back to the furrowed surface of common earth. She looked down at the ministering babe, that could with sweet and potent magic at a mere lip-touch dissolve all shuddering anguishments in a vast quiet—in a nectarous calm—in soul sleep!

What had awakened Mave?

The wind was blowing up chill, and the tall trees tossed and shed at every sway their old brittle leaves, but Mave had not wakened by the leaves' dirge or the keenness of the night breeze. She heard footsteps approaching, and saw a lantern swinging high along the gloomy road.

Neither of the vagrants stirred, though the oncoming pedestrian strode down a crackling twig or fallen branch at every step. Mave huddled the nestling babe beneath her shawl, but remembered now, in wild alarm, that the hour must be unconscionably

late, and that she was still abroad from her alien home. The next moment a tall figure swinging the lantern loomed up, suddenly discernible as Daniel Deacon. He also appeared frightened, however, for, having peered at her for the fraction of a second, he started back with a cry of astonishment.

XIII

THE NEW FRIEND

MR. DEACON stared in speechless astonishment at the vagrants, who, the man at least, the lantern's gleam flashing on his face, awoke, rubbed his eyes, and regarded the dark figure of Daniel with suspicion. Mr. Deacon's sudden appearance seemed to stupefy the man. The dull, grey face, lank reddish hair and sparkling eye of the zealot, whose thin form was muffled against the night in a long, close-folding cloak, certainly constituted a weird shape to find on the outer verge of sleep. Daniel gave the man one of his darting glances, and then forgot him clean in the mystery of Mave's present appearance. He clutched at her shoulder, and when he spoke his voice was thin with high emotion.

"Girl, what are you doing here?" he cried.

He had never before called her anything but Miss O'Moran, and the novelty of the address, even at that moment, caused her surprise.

"Girl, what are you doing here? Answer me."

"If you please, Mr. Deacon, I am nursing this woman's child."

"No offence, my master. The young gentlewoman has been holding the wife's brat awhile since she's sleepy," interjected the vagrant, whose aim now was to ingratiate himself into the gentleman's

regard and extract a trifle of silver from his pockets. But Daniel paid no heed to the interruption. His whole attention was centred on Mave.

"How long have you been here, girl?" he asked, giving her an angry shake.

"I cannot say, Mr. Deacon. I paid no thought to the time," she replied, affrighted at the new aspect of the man in wrath.

"Where did you meet these people?"

"Here."

"How long ago?"

"I cannot say—truly I cannot say."

"You do not remember?"

"No."

"But you have been here ever since?"

"Ever since, Mr. Deacon. Oh, I hope I have done no harm."

"You knew that we have been expecting you these last two hours?"

"I knew—no, I never thought, Mr. Deacon."

"No, no; do not lie to me; no rubbish—you could not have forgotten unless you were asleep. Were you?"

"No."

"What made you forget, then, if your tale be true?"

"I don't know, Mr. Deacon; I had no thought of the time really. I think the baby——"

"The baby! Where is the baby?"

"Here."

Daniel lowered his head and saw her slip the infant from the open bosom of her gown. She did this with a quick hurried movement, wishing to conceal her action. Daniel was staggered, for he realized in an instant that the girl had been suckling

the babe. In the passage of a moment a thousand thoughts thronged his mind. Had he been the victim of a vile cheat? Had the young man Trayner practised upon him a wilful deception, consigning to his charge an abandoned creature under representations of innocence and honesty? The girl was proclaimed a virgin, and here she was discovered suckling an infant! Surely he had been victimized; made shameful mock of by villainous imposture. This conclusion shocked him to the heart. He had always accepted Trayner's character of Mave in implicit trust, although he had paid little heed to the girl herself, but what little notice she compelled had served as good corroborative testimony. She had seemed to him innocent and pure, if rather cramped in spirit and lacking religious impulse. But now . . .!

"It's a rum start, master," said the vagrant, determined to draw Deacon's attention at every opportunity—"it's a rum start to see a young virgin gentlewoman playing with a brat. Trying to suckle it too! A rum start. Ha, ha!"

Daniel looked at the man now keenly. Had he divined his thoughts, and was he lying in the hope of shielding the girl's shame from her benefactor? No; the man appeared to be an utter stranger to Mave, and as such would not be likely to act the accomplice. Daniel dried his forehead with the long silk handkerchief. He felt immensely relieved, yet still uncertain. But so relieved that he was surprised to find that he nourished so lively an interest in the girl's welfare. He had not been aware of this before, and he was grateful for the discovery, as it showed him still constant to the pursuit of duty.

"You must come home," he said thickly to Mave. "Give the woman back her child."

Mave obeyed, meekly docile, but first could not restrain herself, even in the freezing presence of Mr. Deacon, from imprinting a last kiss on the baby lips. The vagrant nudged his wife, and she awoke and took her infant mechanically with a deep sigh and eyes that opened vacantly for an instant but closed immediately in very weariness. Mave, once on her feet, shook the leaves and the road-dust from her gown, and, with a certain distressful reluctance to go from a spot where she had in spirit been fashioned anew, gave her hand to Mr. Deacon. She looked back on the vagrant and his wife, feeling, although their acquaintanceship had run but a few hours, at greater intimacy with them than with the Deacons whom she had known for months.

"Good-bye," said she, "I am truly sorry I have no money to give you. If I had I would give it you."

The vagrant hardly heard her words. He stretched out his hand, and concentrated his gaze on the face of Mr. Deacon.

"Spare a trifle o' siller, gentleman," he cried.

Mr. Deacon paused.

"I do not know that you will use this to good purpose," said he; "it is not likely that you will, but it is possible. I should not be serving my Master, God Almighty, if I did not avail myself of the possibility."

He threw the man a coin and passed on, his arm closely linked in Mave's. The girl longed to look back but could not muster the courage until the vagrants were far out of sight, when Daniel was quick to perceive her action.

"Do you wish to go back to the beggars, girl?" he asked, in a grating tone.

"No, sir," she replied in a tremor.

"What, then?"

"I only wanted to have another look at the baby."

"The baby! What is the baby to you?"

"Nothing, nothing, I assure you, Mr. Deacon."

"You are fond of it?"

"Yes."

"Strange! I have never heard you express before any great love for children."

"I never understood before."

"Understood?"

"I never understood children before—very little children."

"But you do now?"

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"Since I held that one—that little baby in my arms."

Daniel's face whitened. He gripped Mave's hand and gazed at her sternly.

"It is a sin against Almighty God to lie," said he.

"Yes, Mr. Deacon," replied Mave, very scared.

"You were brought to my house by Mr. Trayner as an innocent young woman. I have accepted you as my guest, and I have taken upon myself the office of guardian to you under that belief. You alone here know whether I have been deceived."

"Deceived, Mr. Deacon? Oh no."

"Did Trayner speak the living truth, girl? No evasions."

"I do not know what Robert said, Mr. Deacon, but it was the truth."

"You swear that?"

"I do, Mr. Deacon. Surely it is impossible for you to doubt Robert!"

"You have never had a babe of your own, girl? Swear it."

"Oh no, Mr. Deacon, never. I should have told you if I had. I should have been so proud and happy."

Daniel drew onward towards his house in silence. Mave, he thought, was either an abandoned wretch, capable of the most consummate deception, or else the most unsophisticated person he had met.

He felt shaken. Mave had been in his household for months, but as a stranger, and for this he reproached himself, having made promise to lend her guidance and precept in the cultivation of virtue. He had been sparing in his duty. Only now was he beginning to explore Mave, and already new and marvellous prospects in the girl were opened up to his astonished vision. He was now conscious that she had personality and a certain indefinable charm, but for the present he could not commit his judicial reason by granting such qualities in the person of Mave to be working for good. There was an unusual strain of wildness—a thread of flame in a modest woof—that he was of opinion must be eradicated before she would be ripe for successful tutelage in the higher principles of virtue. In such Deaconesque musings he drew onward silently to his house, Mave by his side, abashed at the sudden intimacy with so distant a personage, and grateful to be rid of words.

On reaching the house Barbara presented herself with a little anxiousness, but on seeing the wanderer's return, at once recovered her habitual "very well pleased" demeanour.

"Where can you have been, Miss O'Moran?" she began. "I declare you have quite alarmed us."

Her husband explained that Miss O'Moran had seemingly lost her way home. Dismissing Miss O'Moran from her mind, Barbara next inquired whether her husband suffered any ill effects from the night-air. Fortunately none; but he would be glad of a biscuit and wine; after which he must retire to his room and there resume his interrupted studies. Mathew brought in the wine and biscuits on a tray, and Barbara restarted her wool-work.

"You will find some supper in the other room, Miss O'Moran, which is left for you, although *we* have finished long ago, of course," she said, straightening her gown.

As much to escape into solitude, from a formality that grew every moment more irksome, as from natural hunger, Mave withdrew to the supper-table. There she nibbled at some cold apple pudding, shivered in the large ill-lighted apartment, wept for Robert, and brooded over her marvellous experience with the baby. The Deacon household could not be more oppressive and distasteful. She aimed to stifle this aversion, acknowledging it—in the light of favours received—to be wicked and proof of an ungrateful heart; but—but—you cannot add four sheep to four pounds of butter—and it was impossible for the like of Mave to find happiness beneath the roof of Daniel Deacon.

Daniel himself did not, this evening, to the surprise of Barbara, evince his ordinary avidity for study. He sipped the wine, broke the biscuits, and watched the quick mechanical action of his wife's fingers in the wool, but showed no impatience to be gone amongst his books and papers. Barbara was not blessed with

a superabundance of her husband's company, and perhaps she was happy, a little and above the ordinary line of her moderate felicity, at his seeming lothfulness, for once, to leave her alone. This may have been, but she showed no unusual animation. Very probably she, at her middle age, was without delusions, and most likely knew well enough that her husband's dilatoriness on his way to the study, where candles were already lighted, could not be ascribed to any personal charm she herself might possess. Daniel continued sipping the wine and breaking the biscuits while the problem of Mave revolved in his mind, and he reproached himself as one lacking in the performance of a dutiful obligation.

"My dear, a very extraordinary thing has happened," he said, suddenly to his wife.

She raised her eyebrows, and, ceasing her woolwork, settled to receive any remarks her husband might choose to make, with polite attention.

"I have made a new friend, Barbara," continued Mr. Deacon, tapping the bottle.

"Really! And who may it be, Daniel?"

"The child—Miss O'Moran!"

"Miss O'Moran! A new friend!"

"Yes; I can understand, Barbara, that the remark must sound strange to you; but, nevertheless, it is apt, to the point, and just."

"I am afraid I do not quite understand you."

"I will explain. The child, Miss O'Moran, has been beneath my care now for over two months, and during that time I have been singularly wanting in my duty to her and to myself."

"Husband, fie!"

"It is true, Barbara. Why, the child and I have

been as strangers! Now I am beginning to discover things. I find that she is turbulent of heart."

"Miss O'Moran, turbulent! You surprise me!"

"My dear Barbara, you must allow me a little more insight into those matters than yourself. I tell you I have found the girl to be turbulent at heart, and I should think—mind you, on this point I claim no certain knowledge—capable of the most unruly passions."

"You surprise me, Daniel, more than I can say. I have always been very well pleased with Miss O'Moran, so far as her conduct is concerned."

"Doubtless, wife, doubtless, but it is my duty to dig beneath the surface of things. I am confident that what I say is true. It pains me, because up to now I have taken no steps for her betterment. I have left her soul uncultivated; I have never, Barbara, extended to her a guiding hand, although I promised Mr. Trayner that she should have my especial care."

The wife sighed and smoothed her wools.

"Talking of Mr. Trayner," said she, timidly, "don't you think, Daniel, that it is rather strange we have heard not a word from him since he left for London?'

"Strange! No, I don't think so; the young man had a sick relative there. He has been detained longer than he expected, that is all."

"You have no fears that this Mr. Trayner played you false?"

"No fears, Barbara."

"But, my dear—of course, what you do is right—but did you know anything of this young man—I have never spoken about the matter up till now—before he came here that night?"

"No, Barbara, nothing."

"And yet—well, you know—not that I have

anything against Miss O'Moran—but, husband, the world would think us very foolish."

"The world is not my master, Barbara."

He rose from his chair and crossed to her side.

"I had only one thing to consider in the matter," he said earnestly, "and that was the will of my Master, God Almighty, Barbara. I know well what the world would think—that I have been foolish and imposed upon, but the world's thoughts are to me as the weapons of an enemy. You know that, Barbara?"

"Yes, Daniel, I know that well."

"I must serve my Master, and in serving Him I could do nothing less than give that poor girl shelter. Suppose—think for one moment, Barbara—suppose I had refused—suppose she had been abandoned to the world, it might have been that on the day of God's judgment, when I stood before the starry throne of our Eternal King and pleaded for mercy, the soul of this young girl might have come before me, broken and bruised, and in its very loathsomeness stood between me and my heritage of heaven. Think of her lost soul dragging me down in pits of everlasting torture!"

He shuddered at the thought, and the sweat broke out upon his forehead. Mrs. Deacon put a gentle hand upon his arm.

"Think no more of it, Daniel—such a thing can never happen; you have done all that human man could do for Miss O'Moran," she said, knowing his disposition, and endeavouring to restrain him from one of those imaginative frenzies from which he so frequently suffered.

"I *shall* do, you mean—most certainly I *shall* do, for my own benefit, for my own safety. When Mr. Trayner came to me that night, a stranger—utterly

a stranger to me—and put forward that strange proposition——"

"You thought it was strange then, Daniel?" interjected his wife, surprised that anything could be out of the common in the sight of a man to whom the visions of Blake would have been naught but credible and interesting occurrences.

"Yes, yes, the whole thing was remarkable in its suddenness, in the seemingly broad but really narrow alternative it offered me. I say when the stranger called on me and put forward his plan, I saw at once behind the young man's innocent request the dark workings of Satan. Oh, I do believe wife, that it has fared ill with Satan and his kind when they have come to grips with me. God gives me that blessed assurance. I know, God bids me know, that I have vanquished them again and again. Hell is thirsting for me, Barbara, as it is ever thirsting for the soul of those who fight beneath the banner of our Almighty Father. I know this now, and I knew it when Mr. Trayner called upon me that night. It was a devil's trick to saddle on my shoulders the ruin of a God-given soul. Had I been a worldly man, Barbara, nay, even one possessed of common prudence, I should never have lent a moment's hearing to the young man; but—but the Lord does not forsake His own. Mine eyes were opened to full import of the decision I was about to make. Refuse, and I might take the responsibility of a soul's everlasting agony; acquiesce, and I might purge that same soul for the peace of heaven. What matter if the world called me fool! What wonder that I agreed without a second thought!"

He paused to take breath, his hands gripped and his arms jerking out with an uncouth gesture,

common to him in moments of intensity. Barbara fingered her woolwork and waited sympathetically for the conclusion of the peroration, dutiful but rocklike against the gathered waves of her husband's emotions. At times they submerged her in their breaking violence; but when, in the natural ebb and flow of a few minutes they subsided, she was found as before unruffled, unbedraggled, inviolately calm.

"I have not done my full duty by the girl," continued Daniel, "I confess freely I have not done my full duty by her. That truth has been brought home to me to-day, but pleased be God, I will make full reparation. She is untutored, wild, and capable, wife, as I have said, of the rudest passions. Pleased be God, I will calm her. I will——"

His intentions were cut short by the entrance of Mave herself, who, having discreetly dawdled over her supper, came now to plead weariness and ask that she might go to bed. Mr. Deacon nodded, and his wife implied, as usual, that she was very well pleased to abide by his decision.

Daniel eyed the girl severely as she stood, in shy hesitant manner, at the further side of the great oak table, the door behind her and light from two candles flickering on her face and arms. He saw an almost imperceptible shade of relief pass over her features at the consent to her withdrawal, and he felt piqued —even chagrined—to find the company of his wife and self so uncongenial to the girl. For the first time, at this moment he saw clearly her dark troubled eyes and glamoured whiteness, the thin throat and breasts, even he noticed the brown mole on the left ear. Once on the alert he was nimble in perception, and he understood in one long glance the whole of her elusive loveliness. This served to stimulate his

self-reproaches over fancied negligence towards her, seeing that beauty is at once always precious and dangerous. The girl was so beautiful that she must be guarded with the most vigilant care, fortified by precept and strengthened by virtuous example.

"Good night, child," said he, advancing towards her with severe penetrating gaze, before which she reddened.

"Good night, sir."

"Do you pray, child, at night?"

"Oh, always, sir."

"For what?"

"For Robert's return, sir."

He winced.

"And naught else, girl?"

She shook her head, and edged backwards towards the half-opened door. Daniel followed.

"Pray for your soul, child. Pray to God that He may save your soul. Nothing else matters, child, nothing. The return of a million, million lovers, is as nothing when compared to the love of God for a soul. Save your soul. When on your knees to-night pray to God for your soul. . . . Go now—ponder my words—go. Good night."

She went from the room in a great flurry, scampering up the broad, steep stairs, and, having locked her bedroom door, fell upon her knees and sobbed out—

"Oh, Robert—my own heart's love, come back to me—I shall die if you do not come soon. Come back, come back; I want you more than ever now—come back."

Daniel took a few hurried paces up and down the room below. His wife had, on the entrance of Mave into the room, returned to her woolwork, not once

looking up during the dialogue, and was now busily engaged with quick stitches in pursuing lost time. Daniel smoothed back his lank hair, and wiped his lips on the silk handkerchief. He was working inwardly, and there was a colour on his cheeks, whilst his eyes shone, and his hands twisted nervously in and out of his tall stiff neckcloth. Presently he walked quietly from the room, and ascended the stairs noiselessly to the third story of the house. Then he crept forward, along the passage until he came to the door of Mave's room, when he halted and stooped low, very much in the conventional attitude of an eavesdropper. One purpose had propelled him hither, and one thought filled his mind, viz.: "If she prays, I shall hear her," and in his purpose he was successful, for he heard her prayers.

"Oh, Robert, my heart's love, come back to me—I shall die if you do not come soon. Come back, come back; I want you more than ever now—come back."

There was an interlude of prayerful silence, and then, banishing her sorrow in the thought of dawn and the hope of a new day (when it was quite possible Robert might return), Mave was at her play-acting.

"Is not our baby sweet, Robert? Oh, come love, do look at its little hands. No, you may not touch it—it is only warm here—in my breast. Do you know I often kiss you when you are asleep, Robert—very softly, of course, because I am afraid of waking you—but now you will get no more kisses, Robert. You may sleep in peace. I shall give them all to this—to ours."

The listener waited to hear no further, but crept from the door. The girl had no thought of spiritual

perfection. The girl was beautiful as the dawn, but inwardly defiled by a wanton growth. And yet—and yet Daniel Deacon's cheeks were burning, and he felt almost as though he had trespassed upon some holy sanctuary. Holy—absurd! The girl's thoughts, the girl's emotions, pitiable in a way from their evident sincerity, were mundane—even wanton. Yet his cheeks still burnt, and he was ashamed. At that moment he well-nigh hated Mave for drawing so profoundly on his sympathies which had been so long dedicated to the advancement of spiritual perfection.

XIV

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

MONTHS had passed, bringing no sign or word of Robert to the household of Daniel Deacon. One would think in that sober habitation of studentry, where of a surety no rough winds came to ruffle circumspection's bowers, time rang but small changes, and that, in fact, a month left no imprint in the passing, save a furrowing of the grass and a mellowing of autumn golds. But, in truth, grave matters had been on foot, for Daniel, his wife, and Mave. The hours were lengthening for Mave, and all time losing balance. The dawns were grey now, and sometimes bleared with a few struggling sun-rays; chill and pale, like the starved hopes they typified. Hope was not dead but sorely smitten and afraid, for Mave was like one who awakens to windy morn from comfortable dreams. It was only now that she was alive to the awful possibility that Robert might be gone for ever, and be seen by her no more this side the grave. She dare not believe that this would be so, she stultified the thought with empty laughter and plausible cozenings of the heart, but in her inmost soul the thought lay like a dread thing, burdensome and rotting. Although she worked to hide it from herself, its weight bore her constantly down, and was never for one instant lightened. She worked to hide it from herself and the outer world,

and resembled in her misery a guilty creature who has laid a sin in thick umbrage, but is harassed by a pre-eminent feeling that every moment may bring discovery. Any moment might bare this thought naked, and brand it as a burning truth; any moment she might confess she had lost hope for Robert's return. Often she would stand by the iron gates of the garden and gaze upon the wintered country road; be caught in the wind's sough and see the road desolate with drift and rotting stubble, finding a certain bitter alleviation of private woe in contemplating the blighting aspects of a wintry landscape. And thus she was in fellowship with most of us, for the simplest souls like to find all nature feeling with them; the most modest heart would at moments of great stress and torment be little astonished to see the stars drowned in human tears.

Mave felt something of the egoism of mortal grief. She saw wasted dawns and early twilights and all earth, so far as could be discerned by human eye, limned with dark chromes, and at times swampish beneath dank rains and shrilling winds. She saw sorrow personified in multifarious shapes and contortions. But never did her eyes meet, as they strained down the roads, the form of Robert Trayner, a glimpse of whom would naturally have rendered all these sullen aggrandisements of grief senseless and lacking in analogous meaning. Her present life offered no compensations, afforded no solace, showed in its barren prospect no lizard hole in which she could creep and lie quiet with her own sorrow. She was obliged to corset her swelling breasts, to be outwardly polite in the modern manner, whilst an old heroic sorrow surged in her heart. Daniel gave her no comfort. He was her constant

companion now, terrorizing her with his ashen face, wild eyes, and passioned flame-pictures of an eternal retribution that must inexorably befall those who achieved not spiritual perfection. They walked often together, discussing and even entering at times into argument, when Mave revolted against words and doctrines which seemed to outrage her natural impulses. He worked unceasingly to gain soul-mastery (which was his determinate goal), and taught her many things by the wayside, but never how to forget or to be eased or contented at heart. She yearned to learn such secrets, but naught else. Daniel's sun-bright angels, his broadly visioned and heavenly expanses of gold and alabaster, his humanly ingenious infernos, cycles of paradisaical bliss and abysmal horrors, disturbed her no more than the fanciful phantasmagoria of chaotic dreams. They were splendid; they were horrible; but they were not real. They in no way affected the questions of Robert's absence, her own aching heart and empty womb, and therefore heaven and hell, spiritual perfection and soul destiny, were to her matters of merely academical import. If only Daniel had made God intimate; the world's friend; the human consoler; instead of a mighty presence throned in glorified magisterial dignity midst thunder clap and lightning flash; if only he had shown religion as another word for the soul's expression; as a child's yearning for the harbourage of the mother's breast; as the science of sorrow which, truly learnt, finds its own hallowed and unnameable bliss; instead of the statutes and arbitrary laws made for the apprehension of beggars and undesirables; the unamendable constitution of a universe that was provincial in design and cruel in execution without heed to individual

pain or taint; if only . . . if only . . . if only Daniel Deacon had been anybody but Daniel Deacon, the conversion of Mave might have been an accomplished fact. As it was, she shrank from the preceptor and the Deacon philosophy, whilst he, perceiving this and dreading an ultimate defeat, pursued her with inflexible perverseness. He extended his full powers, he worked at fever heat, he upbraided the night for its duration—every moment being precious; he conceived plans, he wrestled and prayed. But the end of a month's refractory encounter found no greater result than Mave inviolate and strong, and Daniel weakened and tainted by her personality. He was losing his certainty, his comprehensive hold on things, his definite system; imperceptibly he began to regard life through, and as related to, Mave. When any small problem or question of conduct arose, he found himself cogitating on how it would seem to, or affect Mave. If a scene, a slip of landscape, or one of his own imaginative vistas of Eden pastures pleased or in any way captivated his fancy, it was invariably because he was certain that such scene, landscape, or vista would be beautified by the presence of Mave. Truth to tell, Daniel's perspective was disordered. Mave appeared gigantic, pre-eminent, absorbing, and in contrast all else became stunted and belittled, so that he relinquished his customary avocations and dedicated the full day to the subduement of this strange, fresh disturbing force into spiritual vassalage. But many full days were thus dedicated without any appreciable advance of his design.

"Child, take a turn with me in the meadows," Daniel would say, after a short prayer following breakfast. And then, Mave not daring to demur, the two would walk out in the bright wintry sunlight

over crisp grey ground and discourse until lunch was served.

Mr. Deacon had ordered Mave a long fur cloak, which enveloped her from chin to heel, and in such guise she appeared curiously small amidst a dozen capes and a hood drawn over her head. The drift of these conversations seldom veered, but was obdurately centred by Daniel on only one point, viz. the crying need of gaining spiritual perfection, and was maintained by him at a very high and strenuous level. Mave, on her part, was reserved, though at times, in the spirit of one hunted, flashing out sparks of individual defiance that staggered and alarmed Daniel, because at such moments he caught a hurried glimpse of her inmost self which smouldered. Momentarily dazzled by such flashes, Daniel's task would seem hopeless, but he had fared so far now into the battle that nothing remained for him but death or victory. In one terrible moment he realized this—realized that he must conquer or die in spiritual corruption. He was shocked at this disclosure, because he had primarily considered the conversion of Mave as a small matter; but now found it had grown to such alarming dimensions that, like some leprous growth, it permeated the sweetness of his whole life, and threatened to wind its poisoned tendrons about his very soul. At first he had entered on the contest in a spirit of benevolence and revivalism, determined to save the girl from herself; but the battle had swollen to such magnitude that the destiny of his own soul was now involved, and he grew conscious that he himself, as well as Mave, must stand or fall in all finality by the result. How remarkable was it that all his learning, his erudition, and his heaven-kindled fervency, battered vainly against the being

of an ignorant girl! One would almost think dark magic maintained her against such assailants of light. Certainly she was strongly buttressed by hidden powers, and until such support was discovered, undermined and laid in crumbling ashes, she would remain unconquerable. Daniel, repulsed and discomfited, was resolved that his efforts would meet with no success until this hidden buttress was obliterated in crumbling ashes. All future effort must be concentrated on the furtherance of this design. But one memorable conversation, when affairs for Daniel Deacon and Mave rested in the penultimate stage, visualized the entire situation for Daniel, and showed him his true antagonist, the buttress, the prop, the ally that rendered Mave invincible in fortitude.

It was in the gloaming of early night, winter-time, and in Daniel's study. Barbara had gone on one of her periodical visits to a certain member of the neighbouring gentry, a courtesy which her husband exacted from her in his manful determination to do his duty by an ungracious world. Daniel had been endeavouring to bury Mave and all belonging to her in his books. But he read something of the girl into every passage, and grew infuriated with himself for this inability to detach his thoughts, which marked a new phase in his history. Finally he rang the bell and requested the honour of Miss O'Moran's company for a few minutes' conversation. Her customary submission granted his request, but she entered the room tired at heart of these prolix and, to her, unmeaning discussions. Round what centrepiece would the present one revolve, she wondered? Flaming angels, soul destinies, paradisaical arbours, need of salvation, or some new curio from the stock-in-trade of her preceptor?

As she entered the fireless apartment with its bleak walls, leather tomes, reading-desk, flickering candles, and the general air it diffused of rigorous severity, she felt chilled to the bone. The room was almost dark, and at first Mave, glancing from corner to corner, was surprised to see no sign of her controversialist. Then her eyes fell on him kneeling, his head buried between his hands and a lank curtain of burnished hair drooping on the reading-desk, a veritable picture of tortured piety. He sprang hurriedly to his feet, his eyes moist, and his face unusually old and worn. He shook back his hair on to his shoulders, loosened his neckcloth, and placed her a chair. All the time his fingers twitched, and his movements were disjointed and lacking in ordered sequence.

"Mave, child," said Daniel, "I want to talk to you—a quiet talk about—about things as they stand —about things in general."

Mave was at once disarmed. Never before had he called her by her Christian name, or spoken in accents so at variance with the combative attitude he now commonly assumed. His tone was almost pleading, and Mave, being a woman (despite Mr. Trayner's "woodland goddess" theory), a surer way was to be won to her heart by supplication than any tirades of dogmatism; she who was insensible to logical conviction, answered like a nerve to the voice of pity.

Mave sat in the high-backed chair watching the uncertain flicker of candle-light at play on the troubled features of Daniel as he sprawled opposite to her, one arm negligently thrown across the reading-desk and the other resting on the table.

"You are not tired of all my talk, I hope, child," said he, tapping the desk.

"Oh no, sir."

"Good Mave! Good child! You are willing to listen?"

"I am always so—always at your service, sir."

"Ah, you are very obedient! I am sorry for it. I wish you would show more of your own temper."

Mave was silent, full of stealthy wonder, and not quite at her ease. Perhaps the combative dogmatism was preferable to these inexplicable signallings in the dark.

"But I must not quarrel—I have no time for recrimination—I must go straight to the point. Are you listening?"

"Yes, sir—oh yes—really I am listening."

"We have had many talks together, Mave. I have been trying for the last month, Mave, to show you how needful it is for each of us, child, individually to find complete salvation—to know that we have attained as great a degree of spiritual perfection as has been possible in our several spheres. I have told you all this before."

"Yes."

He leant forward and gripped the purpose of the dialogue.

"But—answer me, with God's truth—have I convinced you of that need? Do you feel any yearning, Mave, after that state? Answer me truly. You will not anger me. Break down your reserve—don't be obedient—answer me with God's truth."

She hesitated for a moment, then resolved for once at least to be fearless and speak the truth direct.

"No, no, sir; no, Mr. Deacon, I am just as I was, just as before—you have not changed me," she said squarely, paling at her own courage.

"You mean that? You are sure of that?"

"Oh yes, I am sure, really sure. You have not changed me, and you never will change me. Perhaps I am bad at heart, but you will never change me. And oh, Mr. Deacon, do not try. Please let me be as I am—it is so useless—so——"

"So futile?"

"Yes, yes, it is quite useless—I do assure you, useless."

"Then I have failed?"

She made no answer, but hung her head in guilty admission. Daniel smiled bitterly and pulled his neckcloth loose. He trimmed a candle wick. He gulped down a lump in his throat.

"Tell me, Mave, are you still blind to the God who is yearning for your love?"

She nodded.

"You have no love for God?"

"Oh, do not ask me, Mr. Deacon. I do not understand these things; perhaps I am wicked at heart—perhaps—well, let me be, Mr. Deacon. It is good of you, but you are wasting your time."

"Tell me, Mave, what does the word 'God' mean for you? What does it signify?"

She pondered, desperately determined to be courageous and end all such discussions for the future.

"Nothing—absolutely nothing," she answered.

"That is horrible, but it is the truth. I am glad you have told me the truth, although it is horrible."

"As I have said, I am wicked at heart."

"No, not wicked; blind, child, blind. There is something that stands between you and God; something that stands between you and the need of spiritual perfection. There is something that is blinding you to your eternal destiny."

She looked at him wonderingly, and shook her head.

"I know of nothing."

"Nothing! Think!"

"Nothing."

"But this is incredible. You have no one great desire in life?"

"Oh yes." She stopped short and flushed.

"Ah—and that—and that——"

"Only Robert, Mr. Deacon."

"Only Robert!"

"That is my one great desire in life—that Robert should return—that Robert should be with me. Robert is all my life, Mr. Deacon; he fills my life; I have no room for other things—other thoughts—only Robert."

Daniel's eyes dazzled her. He rose hurriedly and began to pace the room, his neckcloth dangling over his waistcoat, and his hair wildly disordered.

"No room for aught but Robert Trayner," he repeated; "no room even for God?"

A look of grateful animation flashed into her face. He seemed to have explained suddenly what had for long remained an unfathomable mystery. He seemed to have completely stated the case. There was no more to be said.

"Yes, yes, that's just it," she exclaimed; and then a startling new thought struck athwart her brain, and suffused her with the sudden afflux to the head of inspiration.

"But—but—oh, Mr. Deacon, is it not possible—although I have not known it—it seems true to me now—is it not possible that God is in my love for Robert? It is such a great love, Mr. Deacon. Oh, I can't express it—it burns, it fills me—I see Robert

in everything. It's such a wonderful love, Mr. Deacon, there never was a love like it, never, never in all this world. I can't imagine myself without it now—that would be—would be hell—the hell you have pictured, sir. And I say—I only thought of it just now—God must work in my love for Robert."

She had risen from her chair, and stood before him adolescent, tremulous, and full-bloomed with wine of youth, pouring out her long-shut heart in stuttering confession. She was all loveliness, in a fresh-blown state of what may be termed mental puberty. The pinched garb of compulsory sobriety had fallen from her, and the starched raiment sheet had rended. Now, as never before, Daniel, awed, saw the Mave of Robert Trayner's dreams; Mave o' the woods—glamoured as with moonlight—Mave a flame fruit, soft-pulped, and golden grained of the immemorial youth-tree.

Her eyes stared beyond him, beyond the confines of all reasonable space. She was as one who has wandered in lamentations through wildernesses, and therein been suddenly transfixed on seeing, afar but certain, the glimmering peaks of mountain hopes. To her thinking she had found God. God was the shadow of her love. In direct contradistinction to the Deacon theory which throned God impersonal and vague in a remote empyrean, she had found God a dweller in the twilights of her own soul. God was the striving impulse of her throbbing heart. It was a sacramental moment and she was roseate with calm. She probed the true meaning of God the Word; life and death were no longer enigmas; the scheme of things entire was reconciled to the predilections of her own heart. God was love; religion was loving; life was courtship, and death marriage.

To her Robert Trayner was the touchstone of creation. A single thought had simplified eternity. She was wise, owned a comprehensive knowledge, and therefore necessarily happy. She looked beyond Daniel as he stood on the recoil, dishevelled, open-mouthed, and clutching at the table edge. She did not see his hard eyes, momentarily lustreless, as though the spark of life had spluttered out in the man's breast suddenly fire as they recognized the hidden Mave.

They stood thus for some time confronting each other in silence, both dumb and introspecting self secrets new divulged. The little flame, from the candlestick which stood on the desk, burnt blue, sprang up brightly, then died down and went out in grey empirical smoke. A deeper shadow seemed to have fallen on the room, and both Mave and Daniel were aroused.

"It is a lie," said Daniel, hoarsely, "a bare delusion, Mave. A lie, believe me."

Her hands unclasped and she gave him the blighting smile of pitying wisdom. She was convinced beyond all argument. The finite limits of mortal reason had no power to disturb her calm. Daniel saw this, and was exasperated.

"Mave, you are a child—listen."

"Yes, a child if you will."

"It is a lie, I tell you, Mave. It is more. It is blasphemy." He laughed bitterly. "God does not work in your love for Trayner. God does not know such love. I say such love is a sin against God, Mave, a veritable sin."

"A sin! Mr. Deacon, Mr. Deacon, it is you who are blind now. You cannot understand my love for Robert. Listen, I will show you. Have you not told me that holiness belongs to God?"

"Yes."

Mave approached him, her manner ingenuous and bright with the suggestion of childish triumph.

"And you have told me that pain is holy."

"Yes."

"Ah, that is true! I know it because I long to suffer pain for Robert. If he were to inflict pain upon me, if he only would, real pain—pain that makes us ache and tingle—I should, I think, die from happiness. That is holy."

Daniel covered his eyes and groaned.

"If Robert—if he could—if my darling could sting me or whip me I should be holy with pain. I should delight in my pain. Ah—ah—you cannot answer me. It is true, is it not? Oh, Mr. Deacon say it is true."

Strong with a new daring she stretched forth her hands and touched his gently. He shook at her touch, his hands flying from his face as though asp-stung, and he flung out his arms before him as if to ward off the onrush of an imminent foe.

"Oh, God! Mave, do you know that this is lust?" he cried; and then, impelled by the tempest of the moment, he sprang forward, gripped her wrists, and held her so that her face was not three inches from his own.

"Do you know this is vile, girl? It is no holy desire—holy! God save us, holy! It is naught but a brutal ache of the body. It is foul, Mave, a foul lust, spawned into your soul by Devil Satan."

He shook her violently, crouching so that his head and shoulders were on a level with hers, and his face seemed, in such close proximity to her frightened eyes, monstrous and almost deformed. She was only

physically afraid, timorous, afraid lest the madness she had often suspected to be latent in his being should, in his present fervour, seize mastery over him and do one of them a hurt. The swollen pupils of his eyes seemed spotted with fire, and she knew his talk of lust to be but maniac gabble. She strove to release herself, growing more confident every instant that Daniel was demented.

"Sir! Mr. Deacon, please let me go. Indeed, you hurt me, Mr. Deacon."

"Yes, yes, I will let you go. Enough, Mave! Mave, I will not hurt you. Oh, Mave, I could not hurt you. Answer—answer me, tell me in God's truth, you lust for this man?"

"Oh, I don't know. You talk wild. What do you mean? Please let me go."

"Answer me, then. I will let you go when you have answered me."

She had dragged him in her struggling almost to the window. One of the curtains was pulled half aside, and she saw dimly the tall, swaying trees in the gardens, and, far away, the twinkling light of a cottage window. She wondered who was in the cottage, working with her frail, pliant fingers to release the grip of Daniel's hands. For a full minute they wrestled in breathless fervour, and then paused, as it were, on a deep note. Mave was panting, her hair fallen loose, and one tress straying on her left shoulder, from which the gown had slipped halfway to the elbow.

"Well—well—I will answer you," she said, drawing her breath with difficulty.

"Answer me, then. That is all I want. Tell me, is it true? I say you lust for Trayner. Do you understand?"

"No—no. Not so hard on my wrists, please Oh, my poor arms, Mr. Deacon. Well——"

"Don't you want his kisses, eh, girl?"

"Always; I am always hungering for his kisses. Now let me go, Mr. Deacon; please let me go. I have told you—let me go. Oh, my arms will be bruised in the morning."

"One moment. And when he kisses you, you burn, don't you? As you said, you are on fire, aren't you?"

He shook her at every question.

"Yes, yes. Oh, Mr. Deacon, are you mad? Please—please don't hurt me."

He grew tragically calm.

"Don't be afraid, Mave. I shall not hurt you—just answer. Don't you long for the man's arms to be about you?"

"Yes."

"Always?"

"Yes."

"Don't you long to lie by his side every night? Ha, ha, Mave, out with it. I know you do," he cried, grinding his teeth and breaking out in witless laughter.

"Oh yes, that would be heaven, Mr. Deacon. We should lie so peaceful, Mr. Deacon, snug and warm."

He flung her from him with a shrill, almost womanish, scream, and stumbled backwards on to the table, sweeping with a backward blow from his right arm a pile of books that fell with a crash to the floor. The candle tottered in its stick on the further side of the table and fell also, with a last leaping splutter of its flame, plunging the room in utter darkness. He saw Mave silhouetted against the window, both her

arms extended and clutching at the wooden uprights for support. Her hair, torn from its ribbons, fell about her shoulders in billowy folds, and the left side of her gown had slipped below the elbow. He heard her sob in terror and was himself afraid.

XV

THE WOMAN WITH THE WOOL-BASKETS

DANIEL must curb his wrath. He had gone too far, perhaps even hurt the girl. He realized that he must tranquillize the situation, but for the moment could not trust himself to speak. He was sensible of the loud ticking of the clock, and Mave's hard breathing. She seemed to pant for very life. For all he knew the girl might be weak of heart. He remembered that the clock was over half an hour slow, and that the little slip of paper he had placed between the leaves of "Urn Burial" must have been displaced by the book's fall. Mave did not offer to move.

"Have I hurt you, Mave?" he asked at length, in a choking whisper.

"You are cruel."

"Have I hurt you, Mave?"

"I am frightened. You seem mad, Mr. Deacon."

"It is you who have maddened me, Mave. It is a dreadful thing you have confessed."

"It is not, Mr. Deacon, it is only love. I glory in what I have told, and you cannot make me say different. I glory in it."

"Mave, Mave, for the love of God, stop. I can't bear it."

"You forced me to talk of Robert. It is nothing to do with you, Mr. Deacon; you forced me."

"Yes, yes, I forced you. Perhaps it would be better if I remained silent."

She raised herself slightly.

"You have been good to me, very good, Mr Deacon; but—but—still this was not your affair. Why should you be angry with me for loving Robert?"

He fancied there was an ulterior significance in her words. They sounded to him almost like a challenge.

"Child, child, cannot you understand it is only of your soul I have been thinking? I should have kept silence, indeed I should never have thought of the matter, never spoken to you, had I not seen that your soul was dear to God."

A month, nay a week ago, this had been the simplest veracity, a statement of actual fact; but now strange shadows were moving in his soul, which, in their uncertain motions, obscured to his inward sight all determinate aims. His words failed to convey self-conviction. He was astonished to find that he was beginning to doubt the sincerity of his words, just as he was beginning to doubt himself, and perhaps even the God of his old conclusive dreams. It would appear that existence had jolted from its former pivot and that, in the disorder which followed, he was being plunged through shifting phases of mental chaos. On a sudden all his tabernacled certainties had been riven whole and lay now prone, he himself crushed beneath the ruins.

"Your love for this Trayner is much to me, Mave. It affects your spiritual welfare."

Mave quietly straightened her gown and clustered up her hair. She paid no heed to Daniel, but walked past him, in almost stately reserve, and reached the

door. Certainly life was showing a new phase, for a week ago Mave would never have thought of making such an exit without first obtaining Mr. Deacon's permission.

"Stop one moment, Mave—please stop, Mave, just one moment."

Deacon had followed her to the door, and spoke in a tone of supplication. She hesitated, the door half open.

"Close the door, Mave. I have one thing to say to you before you go."

"I will not close it, Mr. Deacon. I am afraid of you."

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well, Mave, very well—be afraid of me. I wished to speak to you about your lover—the man you love—Trayner. You see, we have heard nothing from him," said Daniel, who was developing an acquired ability for wily manœuvring.

The door-handle clicked, and Mave, looking scared again, waited at his pleasure.

"No, we have not heard from him," she said; "no, we have not heard—that is true."

"What do you make of it?"

"He has been compelled to stay in London. His uncle was dying. He has been detained."

"What do you propose to do?"

"To do?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Deacon, I do not understand. Why, there is nothing for me to do."

"How do you propose to spend your life?"

"My life?"

"Yes. In waiting for this man's return?"

Mave smiled pityingly on Daniel's doltishness.

"Robert may return any day now, Mr. Deacon," said she; "certainly he cannot be away long—it is months——"

"Yes, it is months. But you are certain he will return?"

"Of course."

"Ah! Suppose you never saw him again?"

"I cannot suppose such a thing, it is too absurd. But oh, Mr. Deacon, why do you look like that? Do you know anything? Have you heard of Robert? Oh, for mercy's sake, tell me if you have!"

"No, I have heard nothing. But I do not think you will see more of Trayner. I think he has deceived you."

By this admission Daniel made a false move. Mave's anxiety on thinking he had news of her Robert was dispelled in the pitying smile.

"Ah, you do not know Robert. You are foolish to talk so, Mr. Deacon."

"Foolish! it is you who are mad, girl. You believe the man to be a god—a man whom you have not known a month—you know nothing about him. I say it is only credible that he has deceived you, that you will never see him again. He may be married for all we know. I say we have both been deceived."

Mave stared at his working features for a moment in utter stupefaction, then burst out in laughter that rang true and was merry. She felt assured now that there was in Daniel a strain of latent madness. Therefore he was deserving of naught but commiseration and tolerance, yet she must laugh heartlessly. He was so absurd.

The laugh grated on Daniel's ear, and he let his

passions regather. The girl was obstinate as a mule; she had a goose brain; reason could make no head with her because all receptive intelligence was wanting. He felt hopeless and malignant.

"Poor fool!" he cried. "It is useless to talk to you."

"Yes, useless," she repeated, quietly smiling.

"You have stuck a thing on an altar; you kneel before it, you worship it, you think it God. I tell you it is an ape, but you cannot see. You are blind—blind—blind. You are dumb with your own wicked passion, Mave."

Her hand was again on the door-handle. She saw his virulence, and feared he would be dangerous.

"You disgust me," he continued; "I thought you were pure—innocent of heart. Innocent! Pure! You are foul rather—foul in thought; you are all wanton where this man is concerned."

"I am at your mercy, Mr. Deacon—in this house I am at your mercy. You insult me—you call me wanton."

"I show you your own heart."

"You have never seen my heart, never. Only Robert knows my heart. I have shown it to him, but never to you, Mr. Deacon, never."

He was terrorized by his own fury. It raged with such excess that out of sheer fright for what might befall, were it once unleashed, he raised a comparative strength to batten it down in subterranean dwelling. Outwardly he was calmer than ever before during the interview. He stammered, paused, lost breath, and was fantastically polite, much in the manner of a toper, who strives to assume a sober carriage when faced suddenly by persons of importance.

"Well—well—we can—I think—say no more—I think—we can come to no good conclusion by talking."

"That is true, Mr. Deacon, really true. I will go now. Good night."

She was already half through the door, when he sprang forward with a beseeching cry.

"One moment, Mave. Mave, give me one moment. I swear, only one question."

He was almost grovelling, and the girl halted once more, shocked and sadly bewildered.

"Tell me—oh, tell me, in God's truth, Mave—if—I only say if—if you were to find that Robert Trayner was false to you, would never return to you, had deceived you, what then? What would you do then? Mind you, I said, 'if.'"

She gazed at him, serene as one who has deliberately examined into, and is prepared for, all possible eventualities.

"I would love him if what—it is not—oh God, no—you say were possible, Mr. Deacon. If he deceived me, wronged me, I should love him still with every throb of my body, I should adore him—my Robert to the very end—until I die."

In the dark he saw her face, grey-shadowed, but sweetly calm, almost, he fancied, aureoled in wistful light. She turned, and he heard her gown rustle along the corridor, her footsteps gradually ascending the stairs, and then slunk back into his study, upbraiding the silence with laughter and sobs.

The room seemed cavernous in its gloom, and the curtains, torn aside from the high windows, showed Daniel, by filtering moonlight, a desolated figure. He sprawled in a chair, his head resting on the reading-desk, dishevelled in outward person, and inwardly

the prey of plundering doubts. Through what strange passages of spiritual transition had he played truant from himself? He had been on such intimate terms with himself, every nook and corner of inner consciousness had been bare to light of introspection. He had seen himself entire, and had been satisfied that he was clean in godliness and untouched by grime of earthly corruption. But now he, who had always acted in full knowledge of motive and requirement, striking home with cold precision, was dancing, doll-like, on strings, engaged, to his own astonishment, in sinister mummery. By what force he was thus impelled he did not know. He was unhappy, but unable to explain his misery; angered, but powerless to show the cause of wrath; smitten by mental leprosy, but impotent to diagnose the disease. He could say naught, but surmise that there was foul contagion in the very air he breathed. He could no more now turn to his general avocations or surrender his mind to incorporeal objects than fly to his high-imagined heavens. He had lost his balance when star-gazing on the heights, and had fallen ignominiously from the bright pinnacle of previous attainment down mountainous declines. The air was no longer sweet and pure, the stars no longer near. He was bruised sorely and in the depths. As he realized all this, and surveyed his own broken figure haunting dismal underworlds of thought, he grew certain of only one thing, viz. he hated Mave. She also went flitting witch-like in the pictured dream of his present state, and to her he ascribed intuitively—the woman is strong in the best of us when we suffer—the evil occasions upon which his soul had fallen. Mave was the germ that had bred this evil sweat and drawn his spiritual health with agony. Mave was

the priestess of his soul's hell. He knew so much, but no more. Cause and effect were beyond him. He had no power for the present to determine the propelling cause and the contributory agencies which had installed her priestess of his soul's inferno. He was content in acknowledging such to be the case.

Daniel got up from the chair, sighing mechanically, straightened the window-curtains, replaced the books and the candlesticks. He went into his bedroom and bathed his face in water—wintry water, cold as ice—and combed out the tangled masses of his hair. Staring at his reflection in the mirror, he was surprised to see himself so old-looking, worn as with a life of toil and hardship.

He closed the bedroom door, and went down to his wife, who had just returned from her visiting. She sat before the fire, not at her usual woolwork, but listlessly reading a novel from the town's library, and he was glad to see she was alone. She looked up at his entrance and yawned.

"Where is Miss O'Moran, Daniel?" she asked, laying down the book.

"In bed, I think, Barbara. She may have been tired."

"Tired! She has little to do; but there, I don't think the girl is strong."

Daniel's look was so outlandish that even Barbara Deacon noticed it as unusual. He seemed pained, and suffering from suppressed excitement. When he spoke it was in a tone of disengagement, as though his thoughts were anywhere but on his words. He paced the room, alternately smoothing his hair and gnawing at his nails, but he paid no attention to Barbara, who stirred the fire and resumed her book.

"It is very cold to-night," she ventured.

He made no reply, save a nod.

"The girl must go—go at once," he half-muttered aloud, "yes, she must go."

"Who must go, my dear?" asked Barbara, in accents of placid inquiry.

"Who must go? Mave—go—go at once."

"Miss O'Moran! Daniel, what has happened?"

He halted in his pacings, and confronted his wife squarely, in the forlorn manner of a weak man who determines to be desperately courageous.

"Listen, wife," said he. "Mave is no fit inmate for this house. She must go!"

Barbara evinced no surprise, but was interested.

"When did you discover this, Daniel?"

"When? When, wife? I have been discovering the truth for a month or more."

"How? Tell me. This is very surprising."

"I will tell you, Barbara; it is right that you should know. Oh, the girl is vile! You will agree when I tell you."

He paused to collect his thoughts, glad that his wife's fixed attention was in the heart of the fire. One does not care to be observed in such strenuous moments.

"Well, Daniel—you are going to tell me?" said Barbara, after an interval.

"Yes, yes. I am going to tell you. You know, wife, that the young man, Trayner, entrusted this girl to my care?"

"Yes."

"And you know that for some time whilst she was here I paid little attention to her; I did not watch over her spiritual welfare; I ignored her because I was engrossed in study. You remember?"

"Yes, Daniel, you said something to me about it."

Another pause.

"I reproached myself for such conduct, as it was not compatible with a strict observance of duty. Then I determined to rectify the wrong. I sought the girl out, I tried to teach and guide her. It was useless; the girl is an infidel, and more than that—infidel and wanton—that is the word."

Barbara started, but did not shift her position, save to bend a little closer over the fire's hospitable warmth.

"Daniel, what makes you say that? I am sure I have always found Miss O'Moran very respectable."

"Yes, yes; you do not know her. I have found her out—found another side to her which you do not see. She has base desires. She has confessed so much, and without shame. She longs to play the wanton. In her bedroom, at night, she talks to herself as though this young Trayner was with her. She gives him imaginary kisses, she pretends to suckle an imaginary baby. Oh, it's horrible, Barbara—vile! She is gutter-bred, and all she thinks of is appeasing the vile wants of her body. It is awful, Barbara, in so young a girl; but it is true. I know it. I detest the girl—I have come to loathe her. She cannot remain in this house."

"But, Daniel, this is awful, if it be true, but——"

"True! I tell you I know it."

"The girl is not loose in her conduct."

"She is cunning, vilely cunning."

"The girl is a pure virgin."

Daniel glared—his limbs shook. The word "virgin" disquieted him.

"Yes, yes, Barbara, she is that—as you say. She

is that, but sinning hourly in thought. She is corrupt to the soul."

"She is very beautiful, Daniel."

"Yes, to the eye. She is outwardly beautiful."

Barbara turned and regarded her husband with her mild, untroubled gaze.

"Have you ever noticed her eyes, Daniel?"

"Yes."

"Large and beautiful."

"Oh yes, but——"

"And her lips are like a child's."

"Yes, wife, but listen——"

"I saw her in her bed one night, Daniel. She was smooth and delicate almost as a babe."

Daniel stared at his wife and stopped his ears.

"I will hear no more of this. She is beautiful, granted. What of that? Great God, that is nothing, wife—nothing. I will hear no more—do not cross me."

"I never cross you, husband."

"No, no, Barbara, dear wife, never. But do not plead for her. It will be of no avail. The girl is wanton at heart. I say she is wicked—a thing of wickedness. I shudder when she comes near me. I hate her presence. She must go. She shall go, before Heaven, she shall go."

"Husband, but we cannot abandon the girl. She has no friends, no money."

"Let her find them on the high-road."

"Daniel! you have never spoken so before."

"No, perhaps not—I am distraught. But she has friends! Robert Trayner is her friend—let her go to Robert Trayner. Ha, ha, ha! All she wants is Robert Trayner, and she shall go and search for him."

"You will not let her stay?"

"No."

"You are determined she goes?"

"Yes, Barbara. The house will seem new again when she has gone. She must go."

"When, Daniel?"

"When? Oh, in the morning. Let her sleep the night through and go in the morning. I'll give her some money, and sure enough she will find Robert Trayner. She shall go in the morning. While she is here I feel as though under a curse."

He paused to wipe the moisture from his lips and dry the sweat on his forehead. Barbara waited for him to continue, but as he did not break the silence, rose from her chair, put her book aside and gathered up her woolwork.

"You are going to bed, Barbara?" asked Daniel.

She nodded, busying herself for some little time with the wool-basket, straightening her dress and putting a marker between the leaves of the book. Barbara was always precise. Her husband had sunk into a chair by the door, his head resting in his hands. He heard the rustle of his wife's gown, and, looking up, saw her standing over him. He was about to wish her a customary good night and print a kiss upon her placid cheek, but her look froze him. As ever she was calm, but with a new and dreadful severity, the passivity of the hopeless, and her eyes were glazed.

"Wife! wife! Oh, my God, Barbara, wife!" he cried, stretching out his hands to support her because she swayed.

She brushed his hands aside and for the first time in his life Daniel heard her laugh, in no discreet

merriment, but real, loud, ungovernable laughter. She appeared horrible laughing, because it was so unnatural in her, and also because several of her teeth were gone and the gums showed rawly. She looked positively wizened.

"Wife! Barbara! my poor wife," exclaimed Daniel, and then cried out in fear as she collapsed suddenly, and fell upon her knees swaying and gasping at his side.

"Wife, are you ill? You have hurt yourself? Barbara—Barbara, let me get up—I will ring——"

Her tense fingers met round his wrists, and she drew herself up to a level with him, her face still smiling but white and almost heathenish.

"She is going," she whispered fiercely, "going from here. Mave O'Moran is going because you are afraid of her. Because—because you love her—because you want her. Ah, you daren't let her stay: you are so afraid. You hate her because she has conquered you, because you are grovelling at her feet. Is it true? Answer me. Is it true? May our God curse you if you lie to me, Daniel. Is it true?"

She searched his livid features and the last desperate flicker of womanish hope was extinguished in her heart. He shrank from her, limp and nerveless, and sat bundled in the chair frightened and moaning. Barbara dragged herself from her knees. She was still smiling and laughed a little, only more quietly now, as though in the afterthought of some exquisite piece of foolery. She stood for a moment by the door and looked down on her husband.

"Mave shall stay," she cried, "I say she shall stay. I will not admit you love her so much that

she must go. It is awful to think you cannot bear the sight of the girl. She shall stay—she shall."

Her voice trembled on the last words, but not with tears. She said no more, and when Daniel dared to look up again she was gone and the door closed.

XVI

THE NIGHT OF TUMULT

MAVE, Barbara, and Daniel sat down to a silent breakfast. Daniel neither spoke to, nor looked at, his wife, who, however, officiated at the tea-urn with her customary good sense and politeness, and engaged Miss O'Moran in conversation. How clear and bright was the morning. Had Miss O'Moran observed it? Did Miss O'Moran know that the stock of wools was falling short? She would have to purchase a new assortment from the town in a day or two. The quality of the last purchase was open to improvement. She must see to the matter in the future, as cheap wool quite spoilt the delicacy of her work.

Daniel rose hurriedly from the table, and without a word to the women, fetched his hat and went out through the garden. They watched his tall, bent figure as it loitered a moment by the gates, but made no remark, being accustomed to his moods and reveries, and seeing nothing uncommon in this silent departure. The women spent the day in each other's company, and although Barbara exercised her natural reserve, she was, if anything, more pleasant and confiding in manner than ever before. What she suffered may not be written. But she sat as passively serene as ever, working busily at her wools—a quiet woman who knew the proper haunt of sorrow to be obscurity.

She had reverted to her habitual calm, and seemed not the same creature as in that moment of irrepressible divulgement on the preceding night.

Naturally she was a woman barren of ideas, plain and enduring, but below her surface-calm there must have lain, somewhere hidden away from the world, and perhaps from herself, an individual spark, an embryonic personality possessing natural human wants, dislikes, and cravings. It would seem, according to her lights, that she loved her husband, and besought his love in return, and that Love had made her wiser, even than Daniel, in perspicacity. Certainly she it was who had first known the workings in his soul, who had first revealed them to him. She had none of Daniel's knowledge, neither was she gifted with ordinary powers of observance in general affairs, but she was a woman and a wife, and felt the pulse of her husband's heart. She felt his love for Mave. She did not deduce it from a sequence of arrayed facts.

She had spoken her inmost thoughts last night because love had given her a wide vision enclosing the full truth, and because despair had invested her with courage. Daniel had sworn Mave should go, and she felt, should such be the case, her husband would be lost to her. He would have been obliged to follow Mave. Now as she worked on her wools in the early twilight of the winter's afternoon, she had no fear that Daniel, who had not been seen or heard of since breakfast, would not return, because Mave remained. What scarping mortification this admission occasioned her may be imagined, but, a woman of lineage as well as of ordered temperament, she was able to comprise such anguish in secret durance, and wear her sorrow with a smile.

Night had fallen before Daniel returned home, and Mave and his wife were in bed. He had not tasted food throughout the day, and now gulped down a glass of raw spirit, which was kept in his house in event of possible sickness. He had roamed miles that day, through storm-afflicted forests and desolated fields, his gait staggering, his dress disordered and his manner absent and uncouth.

The morning had been crisp and fine, but towards noon clouds had gathered, and the wind fallen. Slowly a light drizzling rain set in which swelled gradually towards evening, but Daniel did not observe this until he was wet to the skin. His mind was centred on self—the new bestial self that his wife had revealed to him—and to all else he was oblivious.

It could not be true! Dear God in heaven, say that it was false. Prove, oh Lord, that all this time he had been in his relationships with Mave, as he had always convinced himself, actuated by no unworthier motive than anxiety for her soul's welfare. And yet he hated Robert Trayner; so much he was forced to confess. But he had sworn this hatred was because Robert stood between Mave and her God. Now an obscene voice laughed in the wind and mocked this high claim. He hated Robert because he stood between Mave and—Daniel Deacon, because he hungered for Mave's love, and was through Robert denied. He fought against this conclusion, despairing lest he should be made in his own sight utterly base and worthless. But the power of self-delusion was his no longer. It had been atrophied in the passion that gripped him this very moment.

Affairs are evilly disposed when the carnal appetites are aroused in a man of Daniel's age and

character; a man whose youth has been depressed in scholarship, who has glibly assumed from youth upwards that human passion does not for him exist. And Daniel had lived all his days in the shadows of church and study, and no wind had borne him the contagious perfume of poison flowers. He had wedded Barbara in submission to a father's wishes, but had loved no woman. And Barbara, neutral tinted and repressive from childhood, could stir no slumberous passion. She may have longed for his love, but was powerless to command anything beyond affectionate regard, and Daniel continued after marriage as before, a pale student, existing upon books and theory, and oblivious to the sleeping fire choked in his subterranean self. He had been ignorant that the world contained a talisman capable of opening the iron doors that imprisoned a stagnant youth. But now the fire was alive and leaping, and already the thick fumes had discoloured his soul's white panoply.

He knelt amidst the gorse and pricking furze, exhorting God to cleanse him from taint of lechery, and arose confessing his guilt. He saw in his prayers no glimpse of Gethsemane, no angel-peopled vision, but only that white slip of Mave's breast he had just seen on that night when he discovered her, babe in arms, with the vagrants at the roadside. So it was true. He was hungering for the girl's mortal loveliness. It was futile to deny or ignore the truth longer; the truth cut deeply like a keen-bladed knife. The knowledge of the truth wounded him, and at first he writhed in pain, but after a spell of rebellious violence, grew dulled and passive.

When he reached home that night he had touched the final phase. He had wrestled with his passion

and been conquered, and he had learnt to obey his master.

He swallowed the brandy and was warmed He gulped down a second glass, and the liquid ran through his veins in fiery currents, his nerves tingled and his heart beat stoutly. He felt endowed with an heroic strength that could encounter all dangers and accomplish the most terrific deeds. He felt a kindling power where sullen fortitude, born in despair, made him a grand and solitary antagonist of the God by whom he was deserted. He had been abandoned to his passion, delivered over after a life of faithful service into the keeping of friends. Very well, he had all the zeal of a convert; he would use his passion like a scourge; he would gorge its appetite, gainsay it nothing.

Two hectic spots coloured his sunken cheeks, and his eyes were fixed and streaked with blood. Despite his brave conception of a proud and stalwart isolation, he moved furtively and crept about the room as though engaged in some guilty act and in fear of detection. The slightest noise set his heart thumping. He blew the candles out one by one, and watched the pale smoke evaporate in the darkness, wondering what he was about to do. The servants he had ordered to bed, and the house was silent. He sat for some little time raking out the last embers of the fire and drilling holes into the ashes with the point of the poker, then drank the remainder of the brandy in his glass, and thought he had better perhaps try to sleep. He felt tired, and went up the stairs. Arrived in his room, where a candle was burning on a side table, he threw off his coat and waistcoat, but could not muster up another yawn. He was wide awake and tingling; his thoughts

violent. It would be useless to go to bed yet. Still, as he could not read or write, there was no alternative. Perhaps he might take another walk. He walked past the curtained bed, listened a moment to the level breathing of Barbara, and looked through the window at the night.

Not a star was to be seen; the heavens were thickly clouded, and rain fell steady and monotous. He stood here for close on an hour listening to the rain drip on an iron tank that was built below his window in the vegetable garden. The prospect was too desolate for even a solitary antagonist of God supreme, to wander and brood in, on his own sinister magnificence. And besides, every now and then he was weakened with regret and timorous desire of being reconciled to his former peace with Light and Virtue. That was impossible. He must meet the lightnings of the Lord with thunderous scowl and Satanic defiance, for he was magnified in his own crooked sight to Satanic importance, and engaging the Creator in personal conflict. He yawned mechanically, again turned from the window, and inspected the half-darkened room.

The curtains were drawn across the large, square, four-posted bed; his wife's clothes were laid orderly upon a chair; a small pot of pomade, one of his own religious books, and the candle stood on the dressing-table before the mirror. He stared into the mirror, shuddered at his own haunting reflection, crossed the room once more and, drawing aside the curtains of the bed, surveyed his wife. She was lying on one side, her face towards him, and the lashes of her eyes wet with recent tears. He was surprised to find that his wife had been weeping. It was an unusual occurrence, and at the moment he hated himself because

he felt no prick of contrition. As one dead she looked almost, lying in the horizontal attitude that is the ultimate pose of all things perpendicular. He did not remember to have ever brooded above a sleeping face before. The sight was novel and inspired thoughts of death. After all, sleep was the antechamber of death, the twilight prefixing darkness. There was always beauty in the twilights. He would like to gaze on sleeping Mave—just to view her in the twilight. Daniel smiled as he took up the candle and slipped from the room, knowing that this had been in his thoughts, burning but unacknowledged, from the first. He ascended the next flight of stairs with laborious quietude, holding to the bannister rail, and cursing the wood that creaked beneath his feet. The door of Mave's room creaked also as he pushed it open, and he reeled on the threshold, spent with suppressed agitation. He saw everything vague and shadowy. The room was the exact replica of Barbara's, lofty, square, and barely furnished. Garments were strewn on the floor, and a long, white, soft petticoat was hung on the nearest bedpost. Daniel's hand shook as with ague, and the candle went out in a sudden draught. He held it close to his eyes and squinted idiotically at the grey melting vapour, half closing the door behind him with a backward push from his foot. He crept to the bed and his hand touched the hanging petticoat. He felt its fleecy whiteness. He knelt down and buried his face in its soft folds and shed hot tears. He kissed the hem of the garment and the girl's shoes that stood near by, feeling deep pleasure in his ignominy. The most exultant joy he imagined was commensurate with the depths of degrading offices he could perform for Mave and in her sight. He parted the

bed curtains, and, raising himself a little, peered over the edge of the coverlet at the sleeping face of the girl. She was clearly outlined even in the darkness, her hair spreading loose around the slim oval of her face. Daniel could scarcely hear her breathe. He drew nearer and saw the two folds of her white gown curled backward from the throat. The thin, almost transparently textured gown, rose and fell with the slow, regular pulsations of Mave's bosom. Daniel's skin seemed to have shrivelled tight upon his bones; he was acrid, and his mouth full of acid taste. He lifted the coverlet and saw the outline of Mave's figure rounded beneath the sheets. He knelt, lowered his head, and listened to her heart beats.

She stirred slightly in her slumber, her hands unclasped, and she turned smiling on to her side, her face now hidden in her hair.

She visioned a huge cornfield in a dream, where she lay slothful midst golden streams and drank the sun's warmth. Robert was not in the dream, but she was at lazy peace. Then the dream became obscured, the summer mirage dissolved and she started violently, transported into Arctic gloom and quivering naked on a huge ice slab floating down snow rivers. Her eyes opened vacantly on the familiar objects of her room, and she felt a hot breath on her neck. A crouched misshapen human form was bending over her.

Her heart seemed to stop in its quick beats, and for an instant she lay inanimate, but alive with horror. Then the scream broke from her lips, and she struck out wildly. Her hands gripped the object that was crawling down to her side, met round a clammy neck, and flung the man reeling to the floor. She sprang from the bed and threw herself upon him, raining blows upon his face and body. He groaned and

strove to evade her hands, to hide his face from the attack; but his arms offered only poor shelter. She hit out blindly, hoping to stun him, and had she handled a knife, would have been a murderess. She had no thought for the man's identity, no thought for anything but that she had been awakened to find a strange menacing presence by her bedside, and was therefore fighting for her life. She fought cruelly, sobbing the while, but all her fortitude was frozen at his first word.

"Mave—oh Mave, have mercy, Mave, for God's sake."

She knew the voice. She sank back on her knees, dishevelled and panting, and clutched at her torn bedgown. Neither spoke; she heard Daniel moan. She drew herself to her feet and shrank from him, tottering backwards towards the bed.

"It is you, then! You—you are mad then, Mr. Deacon. You would have killed me, would you? Oh, God!"

He shook his head, miserably huddled in a squat heap on the floor, and sopped the blood from his lips on a handkerchief.

"You would have killed me—really killed me while I was asleep. Oh, God, he is mad—mad."

She swayed on the bed, and, throwing up her arms, fell forward and buried her face between the pillows.

"No, no, Mave, I would not have killed you. Mave, I would not have hurt you—believe me—believe me, I would never have hurt you."

His voice had almost a drowsy tone, and he rocked himself and bit into the handkerchief.

"I would not have hurt you in God's sight, Mave, that's true."

"Oh, you would—you would; you were mad," she answered, not looking up.

"Never—never—oh, won't you believe me, Mave—I couldn't hurt you."

"You came here to kill me when I was asleep—when I could not help myself."

"I have said no—it is not true; I have told you, but you won't believe me. Do believe, Mave. Surely you know I couldn't hurt you."

He staggered to his feet, the blood from his lips still flowing freely, and sank down on the bed by her side. Mave raised herself in some alarm, but as she turned and looked at him, he was so abject that she could not be further afraid.

"Oh, Mr. Deacon, why did you come to my bedroom? Why should I die? Why should you wish my death?"

His hands parted, and he gazed straight at her with hopeless eyes.

"I came—you know why—I came because I love you, Mave; because I want you, Mave. Because—because I love you more than God."

The girl was transfixed. The veil fell from her eyes, and the mystery of Daniel Deacon was explained. The truth of the disclosure forced itself inevitably into her mind, whilst all the world seemed changed and fouled. She was blind up to a certain point, but, on coming to any signpost in life, needed no further guidance. She saw now Daniel's purpose in entering her room, and the full explanation of his hatred for Robert. She glanced anxiously at her gown, drew it closer about the neck, and sidled nearer to the curtains, thrusting her bare feet beneath the bed-hangings.

"Oh, Mave, surely you know I could not have

hurt you. I love you, Mave—my heart's darling—my sweet Mave—I love—I have damned my soul for you. I love you. Oh, little darling Mave, I love you better than God."

He spoke in thick, choked accents, clasping his hands in desperate supplication.

"You are mad—leave me—you are mad," she said.

"You are not angry with me. You have made me love you. You are not angry dear, darling—say you are not angry."

"I despise you."

"Oh, God—don't—don't. Why despise me, Mave? You have made me love you."

"You have lied to me."

"Never, I swear by God, never."

"Never? Think of all your lies—your long talks about heaven—your pretence."

"I did not know then—believe me, I did not know the truth. I did not know I loved you."

"Don't talk so, Mr. Deacon—you are wicked. Leave me."

She could not translate her thoughts into words. Her heart was struck dumb, whilst her lips mouthed small reiterations; and Daniel also gazed at her, aching, but impotent to speak the sorry tumult of his soul and blood. If she but knew, she would be compassionate. If he could tell her, she would learn pity. He dropped from the bed and grovelled forward on his knees towards her.

"Oh, Mave—let me pray to you, Mave—listen to me—listen to me. I want to tell—to tell you—to explain—how—how I love you, what I feel like—what I suffer."

"Mr. Deacon, don't, don't—you are mad—this is wicked, Mr. Deacon. Oh, don't—please don't."

"It is not, Mave. I pray of you, listen—dearest, darling, do listen. You are wrath with me for loving you, but you have made me love. You have changed me, taken me—the sight of you—oh, you are so lovely, darling Mave!—the sight of you has sucked out my very soul. I burn for you. I know you have no love for me, but I will be content if you will let me love and be near you, always near you. I must be near you, Mave. I want to always see you—to watch you. Let me be the very dust beneath your feet, only let me be near you. I am a dog in your sight—spurn me—bruise me—torture me, sweetest Mave—do—do, but don't go from me—don't go from me. Let me be your slave, your dog, only don't make me leave you. It will kill me if you do—kill me—it is true, it will kill me."

He sprawled prostrate, with a sobbing cry, and fell to rapturously kissing her feet. She stooped, ablaze with wrath, strong and defiant, and struck him full in the face.

"You coward—you coward, you shall not touch me. I will not be fouled by your lips. I am all for Robert. I am Robert's—all Robert's. His, his, his, to do with as he likes, his for ever, his only. Oh, you coward! I am soiled with your vile kisses. I curse you."

His arms had slid to her waist, and he gazed dumbly at the tempest of her anger in agonized despair. She looked into his eyes, laughed, and tore herself free from his pleading arms. Her loveliness was keen-edged, white, and cruel—cruel only as one can be who is enthralled by love. She knew no pity, but tingled with hate because her body, sacred to Robert Trayner, had been violated by profane lips. Precipitously she fled towards the door, but stopped

halfway, and turning, crossed the room to the other side of the bed. She could see Daniel kneeling by the bed and weeping, his arms outstretched upon the coverlet, his head bowed.

"Go—go this instant," she said, with mechanical calm.

He did not answer, and, being suddenly faint, she leant against the wall, secure from his eyes in the darkness, and waited for him to move. Presently he was staggering on his feet again.

"Mave—my Mave," he cried, peering wearily round the room.

She made no reply, and saw him grope forward a few paces along the bed and halt. Then, with straining eyes, she beheld the dark figure of a woman steal swiftly to his side. He looked up, and appeared himself astounded beyond words, and afraid. Peaceably he allowed the woman to place a supporting arm around his waist and lead him, like a cowed, fretful child, from the room. Mave heard the door click, and Daniel's stumbling footsteps, as he slowly descended the stairs with his wife. Barbara led him gently into their own room, which was quite dark, for she would not let him see her face.

"You are tired, Daniel—you must go to bed. Come, let me help you," she said, in a tone a little formal and restrained perhaps, but not noteworthy in so quiet a woman.

He submitted without demurring, dazed, but sub-consciously surprised that his placid wife could be so purposeful—so capable of mastery. Once he raved, gnashing his teeth and tearing at his hair—

"Kill me—put me out of my damned misery—kill me, Barbara."

"You are very tired, and not yourself. Do not talk to-night."

Her perfect serenity cowed him. In the early morning he slept from sheer physical exhaustion, and Barbara sat by his bedside, on her lap the basket of wools. Only twice did she pause in her work, first to shift the pillow beneath the head of her husband, and, secondly, on hearing a footstep on the creaking stairs. She opened the door a few inches, and, looking out, saw Mave, fully dressed, upon the landing. The two women confronted each other for a brief moment, but neither spoke, and the door closed.

The rain had ceased to fall, the dark, heavier clouds, rent and tattered, raced in blurred patches over grey skies. In the starved light of early morning Mave crept out from the home of Daniel Deacon, beneath a few fast-dwindling stars.

XVII

THE BLESSED MIRACLE

SHE glanced up at the grim, rain-soddened old house, with its enormous chimney-stacks and irregular outhouses. All the windows were dark, and the place looked lifeless and deserted. The road was dank, every hole a puddle of ooze. One small, low-lying field was flooded, twigs and refuse floating dismally on the surface. Mave plodded forward, her passion cooling in the drear atmosphere of a vagrant day. The trees and hedges were leafless, sopped and dripping, the fields and copses one desolate expanse of barren waste, whilst the far eastern skies beyond the grey immensity of leaden clouds were whitened like a sightless eye.

Mave's tumult was sobered under such conditions, but her purpose obdurate. She must preserve herself inviolately pure for Robert, and that were impossible if she made further stay in Deacon's house. His every glance would soil her.

She trudged along for over an hour, not meeting a single person, but was at last overtaken by an old, mild-featured man driving a lumbering cart. He wore a wide-brimmed hat, and his snowy locks fell down to his shoulders, rounded by a life of toil.

He inspected Mave curiously, and offered her his condolences on the morning. She replied that the morning was very bad, but could he tell her if

she were on the London Road. The old man scratched his head and gazed inquiringly at the broad buttocked dun horse he was driving, and as that source of inspiration evidently failed him frowned at the straw tangled in the dun horse's tail.

"Can't say, young woman, that there is any road to London hereabouts. Do you know where London is?"

"No, I have no idea," answered Mave.

"It lies south," said the old man, demonstrating the direction by pointing his short black whip straight ahead.

"Then I am walking towards it?"

The old man regarded her with a waggish blue eye and rubbed the silver stubble on his chin.

"Yes, you are walking right," he said.

"It's a long way from here?" asked Mave, depressed by the waggish blue eye.

"Ay, a goodish way. Thousands o' miles, from what I hear; but I've never been there."

Mave's face whitened, and she looked away from the cart towards the drear horizon. The old man jolted the cart a step forward so that he could look back into Mave's face, and he saw tears in her eyes.

"You're welcome to a seat in my cart, young woman, if you're so disposed," said he, fingering the whip; "I'm going the London way for twenty miles."

"Oh, I do thank you—you are very good—I can never thank you too much."

"Leave the thanks at home. You're welcome, I'm sure, young woman. Woa, Jacob, woa — no tricks."

Jacob, the dun horse, had evinced no disposition

to do anything but "woa," and it needed a lively imagination to conceive so comfortable and domesticated a creature performing any manner of tricks. But the old man had sprung down from the cart with surprising agility and held Jacob firmly by the head before he deemed it safe for Mave to put her foot in the wheel.

"Now then, young woman, look sharp, meaning no offence," said he.

Mave crawled into the cart and sat down on a heap of straw. At the back of the vehicle were some large bags of grain, bulging out at the sides and tied at the mouths with cord, and, although these made hard pillows, Mave leant against them with a sighing feeling of security and shelter. The cart was hooded, so she had no fear of rain. Instinctively she closed her eyes. The old man settled himself on the front seat and flourished his bob-tailed whip.

"Now, Jacob—careful there—gee up."

Jacob responded by a heavy and laborious trudge, splashing up water from the puddles breast high at every step. The old man, content to find Jacob in so docile a humour, edged along the seat until he could rest his back against the side of the cart, his legs up on the seat and his face impartially disposed for mutual benefit of Jacob and Mave. He took good stock of the girl, and her face was peculiarly appealing in repose, the large eyes shut and the sad lips just parted.

"You seem tired, young woman," said the old man, yawning out of sympathy.

"I am tired—very tired," she answered.

"Have you been in service hereabouts?"

"No—that is, not for some time."

"Are you going to friends in London, might I ask?"

"To 'a friend.'"

The old man nodded and relapsed for some little time into silence. He wore a flowered waistcoat, and looked anything between the farmer and the trading class. He wished to show Mave every hospitality, and became garrulous for her entertainment, recounting in flowing periods the birth and history of Jacob and his immediate ancestors. Mave asked him if he knew John Meff, to which he replied that although he was on terms of acquaintanceship with John, the "young slip" (John Meff was past forty) was not fit to tie the satchel of his now deceased father's shoes. The elder Meff, it seems, had been a rare hand at bowls, also expert in self-defence, and on one occasion, in the long-buried past, had "put 'em up" with Gully the Great. After this, Gully the Great, from being a pugilist of the first order, became a parliamentarian, perhaps, opined this friend, chiefly because of his inability to smash Meff, a country innkeeper, in a fight lasting over five rounds. The old man would never probably have exhausted this topic had not a little squat alehouse on the road, where two ploughmen were enjoying an early mug of ale, reminded him of the need of refreshment. He called loudly for a pot of the best, and warned the ploughboys to keep Jacob at safe distance; at which they grinned broadly and remarked that any one could see with half an eye that Jacob was a blood horse, adding that if his master owned half his mettle he would stand treat to two deserving young gents all alone and deprived of a mother's lap on such a blasted morning. The old man said they might drink at his expense if they'd keep a respectful

tongue in their heads, as he had a young gentlewoman in the cart. His manner implied "no tricks," and the ploughboys were content to sink their curiosity in replenished ale-mugs. Meanwhile the old fellow in the cart, who had formed a very high opinion of Mave's gentility, told a little, sad-visaged woman, who seemed to be mistress of the establishment, that if she had such a thing as a decent brew of tea on the premises he would gladly pay for such.

She answered that he could have as much tea as he wanted if he cared to bide a few minutes, and the old man, albeit somewhat apprehensive of Jacob's natural impatience, consented to bide, provided the tea was strong and well-flavoured.

Mave, touched with gratitude at his kindness, drank the beverage and felt almost immediately revived. She took a fleeting glance at the alehouse, when breakfast was ended and the cart creaking once more on the road, and saw it to be a squalid, ramshackle place, poorly thatched and sadly weather-beaten, a few cobble stones in front where a hen and chickens ran and clucked in the wet. The two young countrymen stood in the doorway and hurrahed as they caught sight of Mave.

"Good luck to you, young woman," cried they; "but you'll get wiser before you die. A sop o' ale is worth a dish of yon muck any day."

Mave drew back into the cart somewhat startled, but the old man bade her not mind the rascals, as young geese always cackled, and the worst of 'em meant no harm.

Meanwhile the outlook continued woefully dreary. The clouds lowered and darkened, and once more a dull even rain set in as the wind dropped. Her new friend advised Mave to cover herself well with the

shawl round her shoulders. She looked frail, he said, and chills are nasty customers to take on board the stoutest vessels. Several times Mave noticed that he flavoured his speech with such-like nautical allusions, and she began to wonder whether, after all, he was a seafaring man, despite his industrial habit. As a rule, she was timid and reserved in the company of strangers, but this old man had won a way straight to her heart and confidence. His features were so mild, his every action so expressive of kindly thought, whilst, although garrulous on common topics, he showed no disposition to pry into her station or affairs. Nevertheless, she made him a fairly full confession of her immediate plans. She had been staying with friends, had suffered rough usage, and was journeying to London to find the only true friend she possessed in the world. The old man listened to this guileless history with respectful attention, assenting by a nod of the head to those parts of the narrative which Mave thought sufficiently strained to need positive reiteration, and displaying a gallant interest in the desolate horizon when the girl struggled to hide emotion.

"So you are going to London to find the young gentleman. In what part of the town does he live?"

"In the Cheapside, he told me once."

"So you won't have much trouble in finding him once you get to London?"

"Oh no, anybody will tell me his house."

"London is a largish-size place, I've been told. He must be a very well-known man for all London to know him."

"His name is Trayner—Mr. Robert Trayner."

The name did not evidently carry with it any

remarkable significance for the old man, and he glanced at Mave beneath a drooping eyelid in half-humorous pity. He was shrewd, and knew her to be the simplest woman he had ever met, and his plain duty was to dissuade her from the mad errand of her journey. But also did he know the temper of youth, and saw how futile would be such reasonings.

"You are young to take so long a journey, Miss O'Moran," said he, when she had told him her name; "and there are all manner of rogues and thieves upon the road. Look well after your money."

Mave smiled and shook her head.

"I shall not be put to that trouble," she answered, "I have no money at all."

The old man did not express surprise. He had suspected as much for the last half-hour, and had contrived the little speech about rogues and thieves to verify his suspicions.

"No money! And pray how do you hope to reach London, Miss O'Moran?"

"I can walk, and people will let me ride in their carts. Besides, it is most possible I shall meet Robert —Mr. Trayner, before I have travelled halfway."

"You must eat and sleep?"

"Oh, of course."

"But how, Miss O'Moran? No innkeeper will give you bed or food without payment in solid coin."

Mave looked a trifle bewildered.

"I must do the best I can. I can only hope I shall meet Mr. Trayner."

The old man pulled a leather purse out of his pocket, and Mave was astonished to see that it bulged with gold pieces. Never in her life had she beheld so much money, and was quite at a loss to imagine

how a man so poor in appearance could possess such wealth.

He took two guineas from the purse and added to them some fifteen shillings in silver.

"This will be of service to you, Miss O'Moran," said he, "this ought to land you safe in the Cheapside."

He poured the little heap of money into her outstretched hand, waggishly amused at her wonder and concern.

"Be careful where you change the gold," said he, "spend the silver anywhere, Miss O'Moran, but be careful you do not change the gold with rogues and thieves. Here, tie the gold up into a corner of your scarf and hide the corner in your gown. Wrap the shawl well over it—there—that is safe. When I leave you—we must part soon—ride when possible in the farm carts. Offer them a shilling or so—say you're a poor woman—to take you a bit o' the way. Tell no one your business. . . . Woa, Jacob, woa."

"I am very grateful to you, really, very grateful. You believe I am grateful for your goodness to me," cried Mave, now tearful.

"Tush, tush, Miss O'Moran. Careful, Jacob, careful."

Mave's heart was full, and she saw that wordy thanks embarrassed her benefactor. So the two were silent whilst the rain pattered down and the cart jolted forward on its journey.

In the evening they came to a little squarely built inn, with a bowling-green, poultry-yard and gardens attached. The house was old and quaint in structure.

"A friend o' mine keeps this house, and you had better spend the night here," said the old man.

"Are you going then?" asked Mave, regretfully.

"Yes—down that road to the left another twenty miles. But I must see George Sheperson before I go, or we should be enemies for life. He would never forgive me passing his house."

He hallooed loudly and slashed the side of his cart with his whip. A man and a woman came almost immediately out of the inn, followed by three children, and no sooner did they set eyes on the old man in the cart than they all ran forward together, laughing and shouting, with many expressions of pleasure and surprise. George Sheperson, the landlord, a bowlegged, pleasant individual of middle age, helped his old friend to alight, whilst the children fondled Jacob, and the wife wiped her hands on her white apron, and remarked that she had felt all day something or other would happen. Mave learnt that her benefactor's name was Joseph Hissey. She was introduced to the Sheperson family, and was soon afterwards seated with them over a comfortable meal. Afterwards Mr. Hissey called George Sheperson aside and instructed him to show Mave every possible consideration and make no charge to her, but chalk whatever might be owing to his old friend, Joe Hissey's account—that was, of course, if he thought that personage could be trusted for the amount. George Sheperson laughed heartily over this little joke, and promised to deal faithfully by Mave. He would also see if he could put her on her road to-morrow in decent company. Then old Mr. Hissey played fairy godfather to the little Shepersons, giving them small coins and a bag of sweet cakes he had brought in the cart, and after that he turned to Mave and wished her good-bye.

"Good-bye," she said; "you have been very good to me. Oh, so good to me, at a time when I had not

a friend. I shall never forget your kindness, never—really never—thank you—thank you."

He drew her aside for a moment, and told her to keep the two pieces of gold he had given her in the corner of the scarf.

"Be careful you don't tell strangers that you have gold on you. Good-bye."

She stood in the doorway of the inn and watched him climb into his cart. He waved a parting salutation to the Shepersons, and the cart lumbered away into the now fast-gathering darkness. Tears filled her eyes, and she listened to the creak of the waggon gradually growing fainter, conscious that Joseph Hissey had sweetened life for her and left in her heart a bright remembrance.

She sat for the greater part of the evening talking to Mrs. Sheperson and playing with the children. The kitchen was large and roomy, the rafters hung with dried hams, sage, and onions, and bright pots and cans shining in every corner. The landlord sat and toasted himself before the fire, half-asleep, and only joining in the conversation with an occasional affirmatory grunt, when his wife appealed to him on some matter of family history.

"George, you had better go and see if the gentleman upstairs should be wanting anything," said she at length.

"Not he," answered George. "He's been asleep since the morning."

"How very strange! All the more reason why he needs a little o' summat to keep life agoing. Man can't live wi'out vittles. Stir yourself, George, and go up to Mr. Trayner this moment. Why, my goodness, what's the matter?"

Mave had risen from her chair, her face blanched

and her eyes straining; she panted to speak, but choked. Mrs. Sheperson sprang up and caught the girl quickly in her arms.

"Oh, my goodness, what's the matter?" cried she. "Here, poor dear, hold up. That's better. You look poorly, child. George, fetch my salts."

Mave struggled to be strong—to regain her composure. She grasped Mrs. Sheperson and held herself straight, her heart, that had been quiet for a day, once more all tumult and palpitations.

"Mr. Trayner! I am quite well. Was it Mr. Trayner you said? Mr. Trayner, tell me?"

The Shepersons stared at one another in amaze, George fumbling awkwardly with the salts and seeking enlightenment from his wife.

"Mr. Trayner is the gentleman upstairs—came late last night, young woman," he explained stupidly.

Mave suddenly freed herself from Mrs. Sheperson's supporting arms. She parted them by a swift outward blow from the elbows, and went staggering past George, wild-eyed and gazing towards the open door of the kitchen. As she did so she heard the stairs outside creak, and before she had reached the door, Robert Trayner stood on the threshold of the kitchen, and there was hardly a yard's breadth between them. Neither spoke or moved, but stood inanimate, dazed at the sight of one another.

Mave, inasmuch as she had been partially prepared for the astonishing encounter, was the first to find utterance.

"Oh, God—you—my darling Robert—you! Oh, dear God!"

She stumbled forward a foot and sank heavily on his breast. His arms closed upon her, and she thrilled to the touch of him after these four long

weary months. Whilst he, poor soul, almost witless with the suddenness of heaven, laughed and whimpered and was nigh demented to once more behold his Mave, actual, warm, breathing, alive, and in his arms. Their lips clung together, and their hearts throbbed in unison of exultant joy. They had been long parted; they had both suffered and received hardships from the flails of destiny; but all this wretchedness was clean forgotten in the atoning kiss. They had no thought of their surroundings, of the inn kitchen, or the confounded group who saw their meeting. They hardly marvelled at the miraculous turn of fortune's humour that had, on a sudden, transplanted for them the desolate swamp of earth into bloomy Eden. They were so young that they could realize nothing but the wonder of being in the presence of one another, of being close, kissed, and held in one another's arms. They filled one another's sight, and the world faded, whilst they spilt their souls in delightsome sighs, small croonings, happy tears.

XVIII

THE ESCAPE

THE brave Robert, whose easy candour so often inspired quick friendship, soon placed affairs on their proper footing with the Shepersons.

"My good friends, this lady is my affianced wife. It is by the act of God that we have thus met. I was on my way to her, but had no knowledge that she had set out to meet me."

He turned his remarks to Mrs. Sheperson.

"Oh, my dear woman, think what might have happened. We might have passed each other without knowing—and—and we have been parted for so long, my friends, for so long."

Very shortly Mrs. Sheperson's womanly instincts, thus directly played upon by Robert's frank address and the weeping eyes of Mave, dissolved into sympathetic tears. The mysterious premonition, telling her in the morning that something or other would surely happen before the day was out, was now doubly justified. Mave's respectability had been vouched for by the introduction from old Joseph Hissey, so that no scruples arose to prevent the good woman from laughing and crying almost as foolishly as did Mave, and exclaiming, "Heaven's will *will* be done," with pious emphasis.

Naturally the young people must want to be

alone and so, as there wasn't, as it happened, for a wonder, a glimmer of fire in the parlour, Mrs. Sheperson discreetly pushed her husband, George, through the kitchen door and followed herself. Now that they were alone, Mave saw for the first time that Robert was poorly clad, and looked aged and worn since their last meeting. The lines in his face had deepened, lending a sterner manhood to features still flushed with youth's bloom, and it would also seem that his fine shoulders had acquired a trifling stoop. His manner was not so riotous; it had lost something of its former buoyance, its old game-cock strut that with high ruffling plumage defied the world. He had not that air of splendid challenge common with spring roysterers who drink rose wine and pluck out their little swords to smite offending stars. In a word, he had aged. His little sword was bent if not broken entirely, and the fumes of rose wine evaporated in the chill dawn of experience. He was young still because he loved, but wine and frolic and high sounding babble were playthings laid aside. He had given youth to Love, and Love, the Youth eternal, the sole verity of Spring, had drawn him weeping through the waters of affliction.

He knelt down by Mave, prepared to relate in sober accuracy the details of his alienation.

"Did you fear I was dead, my Mave?"

"Oh no, darling Robert, but I began almost to think you had forgotten."

This was incomprehensible to him. That the faintest shadow of doubt could obscure her love seemed impossible.

"I must tell you all, Mave—as quickly as possible. I must tell you what has mainly happened to me all this time. Let me see—yes—yes. Now, when I

reached London I found my Uncle William—I have told you of him, I think?"

"Yes, yes, Robert. He was ill?"

"Yes, ill. I found him not dead as I expected, but almost that. He had had a shock of some sort —the surgeons were all at sixes and sevens as to what it really was—and although, thank God, he is better, it will be months before he is anything like himself again. He is as weak as a child, sleeps nearly the whole day, and has been for months practically hanging between life and death. Do you understand, my Mave?"

"Yes, Robert, yes."

"Well, when I arrived in London, his brother Peter—always an enemy to me, Mave, as I told you —his brother Peter would not let me see him. My cousin, Mrs. Clarke, had taken up her quarters in poor Uncle William's house, and no one was allowed to see him. They said—curse them—if I saw him, the shock would mean death——"

"You never saw him, Robert?"

"Never, Mave, never. Had I done so everything would have been different. I tried every way to see him. I begged and implored of old Peter and his daughter. I tried to get in without their knowledge. I tried to smuggle letters through, but I failed. My enemies kept a strict watch, Mave, and they beat me. Uncle Peter took over management of Uncle William's estate and business. I was in Uncle William's office and old Peter, now that he was master, led me a dog's life. He made me do work that I had never done before, kept me glued to the office stool, and insulted me every day. Before, I had done almost as I liked, and had always had what money I wanted; but now Peter paid me like a clerk, and would not

advance me a penny more for any purpose. I was merely his servant, and he made me understand it. I had no option but to accept the position. Personally I was penniless—without Uncle William I was a pauper. Now, I could not live, as before, in Uncle William's house, and, as it would have been a living death to exist with old Peter, I was obliged to take wretched lodgings near London Bridge. Here I lived, Mave, here and at the office thinking of you, dreaming of you, longing for you. It would all have been so different had I been able to see Uncle William. I should simply have told him the truth, Mave—the truth about you—about our love. He would have given what I wanted, poor dear old William, and I should have brought you to him, and we should have been married, Mave, and happy for ever. But it was not to be, Mave darling, not to be. I was alone in that vast gloomy city. All day I toiled at the office, and all night lay in the filthy garret near London Bridge. I used to watch the river, Mave, the river you have never seen, dense and muddy, with grimy wharves and reeking by-ways. Oh, the thought of it, the horror, the darkness of my London. And in the evening, Mave, I used to walk about lest I should go mad. I used to walk the thronged streets and the dirty alleys, and keep looking in the direction where this part of England lies. And I used to picture you, heart's love, with good Mr. Deacon—— Mave, you are shuddering!"

"Go on, Robert, my poor Robert, go on."

"And my thoughts used to go out to you, Mave. I longed for you, Mave. Oh, God! what I suffered! I can't tell you. I can't even express it myself. All that part of my life seems numbness. But what could

I do? I had no money—not a penny. I was a prisoner. I could not reach you."

Mave remembered that she had set out to accomplish the same journey in equal penury, yet assumed that she would have reached her destination. But Robert knew better. If he said it was impossible to escape from London without money, it must be so.

"Go on, tell me all, my poor Robert."

"I felt that my reason would go if I could not end this awful existence—if I could not get to my Mave. I conceived the wildest schemes for escape. Once I sank so low that I actually grovelled to Peter, blurted out the truth to him, and prayed, almost on my knees, that he would temporarily release me from the office and advance sufficient money for me to reach you, Mave. I might have spared myself such pains. I might have known the sort of man I had to deal with, a man insensible to any of our feelings, Mave—a man whose whole soul is engrossed in accumulating wealth. Peter scorned me, sneered, insulted me as though I had been a dog, told me that if he heard any more such nonsense he should dismiss me from the office and let me beg in the streets for my bread. In his anger he called you a vile name, Mave . . .! That put the devil in me. I fled from Peter's presence or I should have struck him. I had lost even respect for his age. I could have killed him that moment. He had roused hell in me, and no plan was too desperate for me to execute. That night I worked out of my frenzy a means of escape—a base plan, Mave, that I should never have dreamt of before. I brooded over it all night. It horrified and amazed me. Yet I saw in it my only means of freedom. The next morning, Mave—oh Mave, I became a thief. Don't weep,

love, it hurts me, hear me out now. I had ten guineas in my pocket belonging to Uncle Peter, which he had entrusted to me on the previous afternoon, just before we had that scene, Mave. With this ten guineas I was to settle a long-standing account for Uncle Peter. I was to pay the money on my way to the office in the morning and give Uncle Peter the receipt. I reached the office with the ten guineas still in my pocket. Peter always rides down to the office about twelve o'clock, stays there a couple of hours, and rides back home to his little villa in Paddington. When he arrived that morning he at once asked for the receipt of his ten guineas. 'I have not paid it, sir,' said I, drumming with a pen on the desk. 'I called on Mr. Sam Stone, sir, but he was out, and I was told would not return for over an hour. I said I would be back in that time to meet him.' 'You had better go now, Robert,' said Peter, without referring to our quarrel of the previous night. I put on my hat and went out. Peter's horse—such a horse, Mave—was outside the office, and I went up to the old porter who always held him, and gave him a sealed paper. 'Mr. Peter Trayner wants that delivered at the office of Mr. Sam Stone at once,' said I, adding, 'I am to hold the horse.' The porter darted off on his message, hoping I dare say, that my uncle would give him a shilling for his pains. As soon as he was out of sight, I walked the horse a hundred yards or more, so that they should not hear the sound of galloping in the office, jumped into the saddle, and, once out of Cheapside, set him at the full gallop. I had ten guineas in my pocket now, and was mounted on a fine horse. I had escaped from London, but I was an outcast and a thief. I rode furiously until I was

well away from London. I was joyous at the thought of once more meeting my own Mave, of claiming my darling, but the joy was poisoned by the thought of my villainy, the knowledge that I was a thief and an outcast."

He paused, and the two kissed again, and dried fresh tears. But he was astonished to see Mave so little horrified by his confession. Sweetheart! she did not understand the meaning of his offence, its moral enormity and its estimate in the judgment of the law.

"Mave," said he, drawing back from her arms, "do you know, do you fully understand what I mean?"

"Yes, my Robert, mine—my life."

"No, no; do you know what this action of mine has made me?"

"It has not altered you, my Robert. Nothing can alter you, Robert—change you from being mine, nothing really can."

"Oh, Mave, do you know that I am a hunted man, a criminal—that if I am caught I shall be hanged."

She blanched now at his words, and caught at his hands in convulsive terror. She knew now why he looked so worn and jaded, and the meaning of these lines that had deepened round his mouth. Naturally endowed with a small and circumscribed vision of life, a defect that narrowed her view of any situation, she had but to be enlightened by a word to comprehend in a flash the fullest possibilities. She saw at once Robert's danger, the grim ironic shadow hovering on the confines of her bloomy Eden, and she heard the swing and creak of the gallows tree; she touched finality in fear and dread. Before, all through her life, when confronted with dangers, she had been

afraid for herself, but these were small, pitiable apprehensions when weighed against fear for Robert. She felt the iron eat deep in every nerve.

"But Robert—oh God, Robert—surely your uncle——"

He smiled bitterly, and shook his head.

"I know my man, Mave. He will pursue me relentlessly, he will not rest until I pay the penalty for my crime. He knows in what direction I have fled."

"But, Robert, he has not pursued?"

"From the first, Mave. It has been a race for life, and up to the present I have kept the hounds at bay. I have constantly diverged from the road."

"Oh, dear God, my Robert, come close to me, Robert; this is most awful."

Her arms smothered him, strove to envelop him from danger, answering her thought, and she fondled him with fierce kisses. She was already at bay, kindling over her beloved Robert, elemental with the hunted savagery of a woman who sees the object of her self-obliterating love—her soul's cub—the thing suckled on her heart's blood—wounded and threatened by wolfish beasts at once ruthless and malign.

"Oh, Robert, darling Robert, they shall not touch you."

"No, they shall not. We shall cheat them, Mave."

He smiled and smoothed her hair.

"You must not suffer, Mave—be quiet. Obey me, and all will come right."

"Yes, yes; I will do what you say."

"Good, sweetheart. Now listen, I will tell you what I have done. In the first place, I have thrown

them off the scent—at least I think so, and I have sold the horse."

"Sold the horse, Robert?"

"Yes, my uncle's horse. I sold it in a market town thirty miles from here. He was a fine horse, Mave, and I sold him for forty pounds. That is a lot of money, Mave."

"A lot, Robert."

"We can do a great deal with such a sum, Mave."

"Oh yes, of course."

"We must leave this country. Go to France, I think. It is a fine place, France, where all men enjoy liberty, Mave. Would you like to go to France?"

"Oh yes, Robert, really I would, with you."

It would have sufficed for her contentment had he said America or the Arctic regions. She knew no more of the geographical positions of such countries than of the eclipses and motions of the heavenly planets. France and America or the Arctic regions sounded equally far away, but the end of the world was near enough if it offered a safe asylum for love and Robert. The most dismal swamp, the most arid wilderness, would be bloomy Eden with Robert. Climatic conditions and difficulties of travel were obscured to her narrow vision. She had one need in life, and, that achieved, all else could be endured, and even coloured and made warm by the fervent and indomitable blisses of a fulfilled heart. She was prepared to make an instant start for France.

"You see, it would be better for us, Mave," said Robert. "I should be safe, once out of this execrable England!"

"Oh yes, let us go, Robert."

The young man had risen to his feet, and was pacing the large square kitchen with moody strides. He tried, but failed to figure out a complete plan for their proposed journey, so dismissed the matter peremptorily until the next morning. Truth to tell, he was dazed, in the precipitous rush of recent events, and incapable of thinking with his customary swift precision. The theft, the flight from London, the pursuit, the horse sale, the unexpected and as yet unaccountable manner in which he had met Mave, were all strange and stirring events, and each individually the adventure of a lifetime in contrast to the dead level of his former existence. But they had all merged one into the other with a startling rapidity, only comparable to the sliding sections of a seaman's telescope which shuts down with a snap. The last week outbalanced in action the slow course of twenty-three years. A week ago he had been immured, a struggling prisoner, in the old dusty offices of William and Peter Trayner, staring through the musty windows at the sober crowds and rain-drenched pavements of Cheapside, and now that seven days had elapsed, during which time he had become a thief and a fugitive from justice, he found himself in a strange inn-kitchen, and on his shoulder rested the tired head of his own Mave. It was all fugue-like and hardly actual. The very kitchen, with its smoked rafters, hams, and onions, its smooth clean hearth, and old oak dresser, its glittering pots and pans, and Mrs. Sheperson's apron hanging behind the further door which led to the sculleries, seemed a scene in some homely dream. Yet it was all most positively real and stubbornly substantial. He could hear the rain lashing the windows, the night gusts roaring through the chimneys, and the sounds

reminded him of that other night in John Meff's hostelry, when Mave had come to him, pale and glamoured, out of the rain and the darkness. He was so soothed by her presence now, after four slow sandaled months of perpetual misery spent in alienation from her side, that he felt slumbrous in the sudden calm. He marvelled over the chaste, sad mouth and angel face of Mave, kissed her quietly, and threaded his fingers through the silken meshes of her hair. So occupied, he was peacefully content, in state analogous to when one stirs in lazy warmth between the dawn and some slow-fading dream. How beautiful was Mave, and how blest was he who had won her heart's devotion! He took pride in the thought that he had lodged her in the safe sanctuary of the Deacon household, that—— He was confronted by two questions which he should have asked an hour ago. Where was Mr. Deacon? Why was Mave alone in a country inn, miles from Mr. Deacon's domicile? He was astounded that these obvious questions had not occurred to him before, and roused himself.

"Mave," said he, "what are you doing here, child? Where is Mr. Deacon?"

"Mr. Deacon! Where is Mr. Deacon? I do not know, Robert."

She smoothed back her hair, and appeared so startled in manner, that he took instant alarm.

"Mave, tell me. Has anything happened? What does all this mean? Has anything happened?"

"Yes, Robert."

"Tell me, Mave. What does this mean?"

The rapidity of his questioning flurried her poor wits that had slept a moment before on his shoulders.

"I do not know, Robert. I do not know."

"Mave, Mave, listen. How did you come here? Are you alone here?"

"Yes, Robert."

"Alone!"

"Yes."

"But where are the Deacons?"

"At home, I suppose, Robert."

"At home! They know you are here?"

"I cannot say."

"What! You have left the Deacons?"

"Yes."

"Left them! When?"

"This morning."

"Great Heavens above, what has happened, Mave? Darling, darling, tell me why are you here?"

"I was going to London, Robert," she answered.

"To London?"

"To London for you. I could not wait longer, Robert."

She spoke with that childish simplicity of hers, so frank, so sweet sounding in its implicit trust, which always drew from Robert a hard, spasmodic catch of the breath. The child in Mave compelled his awe and reverence. It was the child in Mave that sanctified the girl; the spirit of the eternal child who peers out upon this fractious world from the white may bushes abloom on the marge of heaven.

"Oh, Mave, did you, then, think I would not return?" cried Robert.

"No, Robert."

"You trusted me; you believed in me?"

"Yes, Robert, with my life."

"It was not doubt that brought you here?"

"Doubt? Oh no, really no. Oh, Robert, Robert, I must tell you, I must explain, I was—driven—here."

"Driven!"

"Mr. Deacon was cruel to me. He drove me away."

Robert sank back and stared at her in speechless perplexity. Her words rang out clearly in his hearing, but he repeated them to himself. They did not seem compatible with reason, "Mr. Deacon was cruel. He drove me away." The fixed planets abiding in Robert's mortal orbit seemed to have suffered chaotic revolution. The brightest stars were drowned in dense eclipse. Mr. Deacon cruel! Mr. Deacon, the patron of the virtues, the man whose life and sentiments Robert so often, when suffering in London, had remembered as examples of true saintly endurance; whose memory had sweetened in some small measure the heat and bitterness of his conflict against untoward circumstance. His one content had been assurance of Mave's safety in the keeping of Mr. Deacon. He had thanked God every night and day that so pure a benefactor, a man of such exceptional nobility, despite his crack-brained creeds and heresies, had the guardianship of precious Mave. And now he had returned to find that in this, as in most other things, his beliefs had played him false, and that he had been solacing his heart on vain delusions.

"Mr. Deacon cruel to you, Mave!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Deacon drove you away! Child, child, what on earth does it all mean?"

"He was cruel to me—most cruel."

"Mr. Deacon! Think, Mave, think."

"It is true, Robert. I fear to tell you all—it has been very dreadful, Robert, very dreadful."

She did, in fact, shrink from Robert's anger, which she knew the recital of her controversy with Daniel Deacon would arouse to tempest fury. She remembered when she had told him that the man who had first directed him to Mr. Deacon's residence—the Man with the Cudgel—was identical with the ruffian who had insulted her in the streets of the market town on the night she and Miss Emma Wardale had parted company, how he had purpled in wrath and hatred. In what manner, then, would he receive the story of her wrongs at the hands of Daniel Deacon, the intimate wrongs, the inflammatory culmination of the whole *ménage* in that soul-squalid scene within her bedroom?

"Tell me what has happened, my Mave, tell me all," said Robert, aware now that extraordinary events lay in the wind. "Let me know the whole truth, sweetheart; I am quite in the dark now. I cannot understand it at all. I am quite fogged. Tell me, Mave, all the truth, however long, however terrible. Now I will be quiet and listen. You see I must know. I must know the truth about everything that—— God! what's that? Listen, Mave, listen. Shoo, shoo—oh, God, Mave!"

He had been adjuring Mave to relate the full truth in the Deacon matter, himself momentarily obscured in the mystery, and only dimly conscious of the rain lashing against the window-panes, and the night gusts roaring through the chimneys, when he had been suddenly brought to a halt by great noises other than the voices of rain and wind. The sounds were at first mingled with the storm, indistinct but cumulative. They swelled above the rain, beyond the wind, lusty shouts and wild halloes, jingle of horse harness, whip-crack, and the rush of iron-shod

hoofs. They swelled in volume, drawing nearer, splashing out of rut and puddle on to the stone flags of the inn yard, when a loud voice called halt. Mave had risen from her chair and stood becalmed and statue-like, gazing into Robert's hunted eyes.

"Mave, they are after me," he whispered, catching at her hands.

"Go, fly—go, Robert."

Several voices could be heard shouting in the yard, and then a heavy knock sounded on the door and the iron bell clanged out a swift volley of brazen notes. Robert's purpose seemed uncertain; but Mave, with a steady hand, pointed to the further door.

"Go, Robert."

A dozen blows belaboured the heavy door, and the bell slowed down into a regular hollow booming. Somebody threw open a window in the upper part of the inn.

"Open," bawled a voice from the yard.

"What do you want?" cried George Sheperson.

"A thief, blockhead. Damn you, come down and open the door. Curse you, I'll teach you to play with law officers. Come down this minute, I say."

The voice from the yard died away in a flood of filthy epithets, and the next moment Sheperson came scuttling down the stairs.

"Go! Oh, God, make him go—go, Robert."

"Yes, I will go. Wait here for me—stay here, my dear dove, my precious, stay a week, a month. I shall come back here for you when they're gone. Stay."

He gave her one parting look, and in that moment, when the hunt ran so fierce, such a look

from Robert had the eloquence and the vivid expression of truth that is alone the gift of suffering, if not despair. He turned, flung open the door, and Mave, behind him and alert as never before, shut it close upon him as a dozen feet scampered into the outer hall. Robert was through the sculleries and in a little bowling-green. He sprang the gate and raced past the deserted stables, where a lantern was hanging in one of the boxes. A man's coat was suspended on a pitchfork stuck in a heap of refuse and manure, and he swerved aside and doubled down a little path, between the stables and the back of the bowling-green, which was used for the purpose of carrying water from the pump to the kitchen gardens. Once at the end of this he sank almost knee deep in a bed of soft soil, rain-soddened and churned to mud, and he saw he was in the vegetable garden at the back of the inn with nothing but a wooden fence, three feet high, between him and the open country. He struggled out of the ooze, almost losing his boots in the endeavour, and clambered, spent and breathless, over the fence into a low ditch flushed with rain water. He was free of this with a jump, and stood on a square tract of uncultivated ground, skirted on the further side by he knew not what, only he was certain that the margin must run parallel and not to or from the high-road. He doubled down to the stature of a pigmy and ran straight forward.

XIX

A CHANGE OF FRONT

MAVE stood upright, her back to the door through which Robert had just fled, facing the other entrance to the kitchen which led to the outer hall, the parlour, and the front of the house. Her face was bloodless and her hands clenched, but she felt herself strong and resolute, an alien savagery raging in her blood that would have contested the passage of the door before which she stood, at the point of death. She heard Robert dash through the sculleries, and from the front hall loud, mingled voices came to her and the tramp of feet. George Sheperson seemed to be disputing the right of entry, and Mave heard oaths and threats whilst the tramping feet always drew nearer to the kitchen. Suddenly, like a screech owl, the thin frenzied tones of Daniel Deacon rose high above the general uproar, and at the sound her courage faltered and she was pricked with fear. Her eyes fell upon a bread-knife lying upon the table, and she darted forward and clutched it beneath her shawl, afraid the next instant at having it in her possession. The hubbub outside increased, and suddenly, on top of what sounded like a scuffle, the door fronting Mave was flung open and Daniel Deacon foremost, accompanied by a short stout man, but with three others and George Sheperson at his heels, rushed stumbling into the

kitchen. Deacon saw Mave first, and threw up his arms with a cry of shrill triumph.

"There—there—there she is, the thief, the wanton. I've found her—there she is, look. Oh, praise God, we've got her fast—got her, my men, got her safe."

He screamed out his words to the short thick-set man by his side, whom he held by the collar, and then, laughing wildly, he snatched his hat from his head and threw it madly amidst the pots and crockery on the dresser. His looks were demoniac, his face livid and sunken, his eyes swollen, whilst his drenched garments, tattered and mud-stained, hung close to his emaciated figure. His long mane of red hair, lank with rain, fell tangled on his shoulders, and his lips were curled backwards from his white, set teeth. He flung his arms about indiscriminately, glancing in crazy triumph from the terrified girl, who had fallen back against the door, to the faces of his confederates.

One of the men, one who hovered on the threshold of the room, Mave remembered to have seen before, on that night when Robert had first carried her into John Meff's parlour. It was Mr. Mosely, the attorney, and he stood in a characteristic attitude of uncertainty, shivering, hat in hand, his high forehead wrinkled up, and his eyebrows raised, the whole man pausing as it were on a note of interrogation. The short thick-set fellow, who had first entered the kitchen with Daniel Deacon, was now the centre of the scene. He was dressed in a dark, full-skirted blue coat, stiff leggings, and a drab waistcoat. His face was rounded and double-chinned, beetroot coloured and pouchy about the cheeks, his eyes small, deep-set, and twinkling, his nose flat, his ears sharply pointed, and leaf-shaped, and his short black hair bristly and straight.

He stood in the middle of the kitchen puffing for breath after his recent exertions, whilst a young, lemon-haired man pirouetted on the hem of his precious garments. The other individual, who completed the company, was hidden behind George Sheperson, his wife, an old stable-hand, and two whimpering servant-girls.

"Is that the young 'ooman, Mr. Deacon?" said the short, blue-coated man, in a husky voice.

"It is, Mr. Proudlove—that is the creature. Oh, when I think of her wickedness—when I think of all her vileness, to one who has been so good to her, Mr. Proudlove, when I think——"

"You're my witness, Mr. Deacon," interrupted Proudlove, importantly, explaining by a gesture that he was aware of the full extent of Mr. Deacon's wrongs.

"So you're Vincent Proudlove, the thief-catcher, are you?" said George Sheperson, stepping forward.

"At your service, my man."

"And pray what's the young woman done?" asked George, ignoring Vincent Proudlove's consequential demeanour.

George Sheperson, now roused from his lazy slumbers, was acting with surprising alacrity. Vincent Proudlove looked at him and frowned with suspicion.

"I don't answer for my actions to such as you," said he, thumping his chest. "Keep quiet my man. You've stood in the way o' justice enough for one night."

Mr. Proudlove turned and whispered something to the lemon-haired young man, who fidgeted at his elbow, on which the underling made a step forward towards Mave. George Sheperson interposed his

person between the trembling girl and Proudlove's assistant.

"What's the young woman done?" he reiterated in a loud voice. "Who the devil are you? What do you want? You won't touch her in my house till you show cause."

"Out of my way," said the young man. But George Sheperson, with a gentle push, sent him back full on to the capacious stomach of his master.

The women looked frightened, and began to cry. Mave alone stood calm and tearless by the door, but her hands trembled, and something dropped from her shawl and fell clattering to the floor. It was a kitchen knife, and at the sight of it Mr. Mosely, who had now elbowed himself to the side of Daniel Deacon, started visibly.

"Do you see that?" said Proudlove with a grin, and, stepping forward, he caught George Sheperson by the collar of his coat.

The young man slipped past the two, and seized Mave by the arms. The girl's one thought was to guard the door, and she struggled desperately, and, indeed, threatened to shake off the grasp of her captor. Deacon seeing this, and fearing she might fly through the door, flew to the fellow's assistance, with high hysteric cries, caught the girl round the waist, and together they dragged her from the door. At this point Vincent Proudlove found himself staggering against the table with a strip of George Sheperson's coat-collar in his hand, and a general scuffle seemed imminent. Mr. Mosely intervened, grasping Deacon with one hand and extending the other imploringly to Vincent Proudlove. He looked straight into the scared eyes of Mrs. Sheperson.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, let me speak. I must

speak; there is a great misunderstanding," he cried, shouting to obtain a hearing. "Mrs. Sheperson, ma'am, let me save your husband. Good God, ma'am, do you know this means the gallows?"

The words had magic effect, and before George Sheperson could deliver a well-aimed blow at Vincent Proudlove, his frightened wife clung weeping round his neck.

"George—oh, my George, calm yourself; listen."

"All right, wife, all right. Let 'em explain themselves. By what right do they seize this young woman, a friend of Joseph Hissey, and decent enough, I'll swear. Give me a good reason, and I'll have no more to say in the matter."

"We will, sir, be assured, we will," cried Mr. Mosely, darting swiftly between George and the clenched fists of Vincent Proudlove. "Oh, Mr. Proudlove, patience; my good sir, patience. I will save this rash man from himself: patience, I beg of you."

"Curse me, don't he know he can swing for assaulting a law officer—in execution o' duty too? All right, Mosely, go ahead. Here, William, sling her in that chair."

Deacon and the young fellow whom Proudlove had called William, pushed Mave down on a kitchen chair. William stood by her side, a vigilant sentinel of justice, one hand on her shoulder, whilst Daniel thrust his hands in his breeches-pockets and began pacing the kitchen. The pupils of his eyes were large and staring, and sweat literally poured from his face.

"Mr. Sheperson," said Mosely, after a preliminary cough, "this young woman has been for some time past the recipient of my friend's (our good Mr.

Deacon—himself a magistrate) benevolence. He has befriended her in a thousand ways, and she has lived on his generosity. This morning she fled from his house, taking with her the clothing you see, which is Mr. Deacon's personal property. That shawl, which she is now wearing, is of great value, and belongs to Mr. Deacon's good wife. Mr. Deacon charges the wretched woman with theft, and Mr. Proudlove and his assistant are here to arrest her."

Vincent Proudlove nodded. He was leaning against the table and trimming his nails with a small pocket-knife in a manner of great nonchalance. Mosely turned a look of inquiry to Daniel Deacon.

"Am I correct, my good sir?" he asked, anxiously.

Deacon halted before the kitchen fire, clasped his hands and closed his eyes.

"Yes, yes, Mr. Mosely," he cried, in his thin quavering accents, "all you have said is true. But these people cannot understand all I have suffered; I have treated her as my daughter; I have loved and cherished her as such. She has been one of my family. I have been her guardian—I took her into my house out of pure kindliness—and in every way have performed a guardian's duty. Oh, you cannot know how vile she has been—how wanton—how debased. She looks white and innocent! My God, innocent! But she is foul to the heart. Her looks would cheat you. You think her pure. Pure! She is full of the worst passions. A wanton—a wanton, I say, and a thief."

His voice shrilled, and he shook with frenzy, but never once opened his eyes or looked towards Mave. She sat huddled in the chair, bloodless to the lips; amazed, almost insensate, but not weeping. She

watched the steam rise from Daniel's drenched garments, gazed at the bone handle of Vincent Proudlove's knife, and noticed that Mr. Mosely's shoe-laces were unfastened. But Robert was her one thought, and, although affairs had taken so remarkable a turn and she herself had proved to be the object of pursuit, she felt a glowing satisfaction in knowing that every moment Robert was drawing further from danger. Daniel had broken down, had thrown himself into a chair, and, hiding his face upon his elbow, was weeping in ungovernable hysteria. Mosely raised his hands and glanced up to the ceiling.

"Oh, this good man," he exclaimed, "how he has been deceived. Do you see what he suffers?"

Vincent Proudlove threw a contemptuous glance at Daniel's broken figure, his head bowed between his hands, and the long hair falling almost to his knees.

"Well, are you satisfied *now?*" said Proudlove to George Sheperson, with an ugly curl of the lip as he closed his knife and stretched himself.

George, still bewildered, gazed over his wife's shoulder, his faith in Mave rudely shaken by such testimony. His wife thought only for her husband's safety, and already had condemned Mave as a loose impostor come to plague honest people by her sins. But George was still only half convinced. The present charges brought against the young woman were incongruous with the introduction from old Joseph Hissey, and yet—Mr. Deacon was a magistrate and a man of the most guileless repute.

"Where is the young man who was here a minute ago?" he asked.

Mave gave him a piteous glance imploring silence.

"What young man?" snapped out Proudlove.

"A friend o' this young woman—a Mr. Trayner."

Daniel leapt up from his chair.

"He has been here, has he? That villain was with her, you say. A low wretch of the worst order—a partner in her infamy—her man—her paramour. God curse the villain!"

He shook his clenched fist frenziedly and ground his teeth, relapsing weak from the fury of his own mad passion.

"You know the fellow then," said Proudlove.

"Know him! He was the impostor who first prevailed on me to take that girl beneath my roof—prevailed on me by lies; she was a virgin, ha, ha! he said—a virgin—I should not like to keep her score of bastard brats, ha, ha, ha!"

His laugh was horrible and grating, but Mr. Mosely joined in with a timorous echo.

"Well, the fellow's gone. Shall we search the house?" asked Proudlove, intent as usual on business.

Mr. Mosely was instantly grave. The prospect of meeting Robert Trayner under such conditions struck him as a shade less pleasant than an encounter with Satan himself.

"We have nothing against the fellow, I think," he said quickly. "If I may advise, Mr. Proudlove, I should not trouble myself about him."

Proudlove considered for a moment, then nodded.

"I dare say by this time he's miles away," he remarked.

"Gone—gone without paying his reckoning. Do you hear that, George?" exclaimed Mrs. Sheperson, anxious to insure her husband's safety by alienating his sympathies from Mave and Robert.

George gently released himself from the clasp of his wife's arms.

"I don't think I can interfere wi' you," he mumbled scratching his head, "seeing as Mr. Deacon is a magistrate, and everything looks fair and square."

"Interfere wi' us," chuckled Vincent Proudlove. "Another word from you, and you'd have spent the night in the lockup at Marside, where that young 'ooman goes this minute."

Mave began to weep quietly.

"Oh, you are wicked. I have done nothing. You are lying, Mr. Deacon. Oh, God knows I have done nothing."

It was the first time she had spoken, and at the sound of her voice, pleading and tearful, Daniel started, pressed his hand over his heart as though stabbed, and groaned. He glanced at her furtively beneath slant brows and their eyes met: hers, large, tearful, and appealing; and his hot, aching, shot with blood. He cowed before her and covered his eyes, sinking back into the chair, burst into a fresh gush of feverish tears. He was on the rack, agonized by an ingenious torture of his own device. He had been cruel to Mave but to himself a friend.

Proudlove picked up his brown slouch hat and shook the wet from the brim.

"We'd best be moving," said he; "leave the horses here—get a cart, and drive straight to Marside."

"A sop o' summat wet afore we go," cried a stentorian voice; and the man who had been the last of the party of pursuers to enter the kitchen sprang up from his stool by the door and stalked towards the table.

He was a fellow of tremendous physique, tall, square-shouldered and big-jawed, with a coarse brutal face and fierce eyes glowering beneath bushy brows. He looked little better than a beggar, in a loose

ragged coat, patched shoes, and flannel shirt. A round fur hat was pulled down almost to his eyes, and in his left hand he swung a heavy cudgel. Mave recognized him at once as the ruffian who, on that memorable night, when she had loitered outside from John Meff's inn in the rain, praying for courage to enter, had insulted her with vile caresses. All the terror he had inspired in her then rose up now in her heart. She clutched at the chair arms and watched with the fascination of horror his loose swinging gait, and saw that two of his fingers were split and twisted, and that his sun-browned face was disfigured by two white scars. The man's cudgel tapped the table.

"Thirsty work, this," said he, in a low growling tone.

"So it is," agreed Vincent Proudlove. "Bring us a pot of ale before we depart."

Mrs. Sheperson dried her eyes and scurried out of the kitchen with much wringing of hands and mumbling gasps. She returned laden with four foaming pots of ale, but before she had reached the table Daniel snatched one from her hands and drained it dry with fevered thirst. Still his mouth was parched and his throat like fire. Proudlove and the Man with the Cudgel took a pot each, whilst Mr. Mosely, after sipping his, handed it to the young fellow William.

"That's done," said Proudlove, sighing his satisfaction. "Warm work to-night. We'd better have a cart, I think, to get to Marside."

"What about the horses?" interjected Mosely.

"Leave 'em here. It's pouring with rain outside. I'll put my prisoner in a cart, unless you'd like a ten-mile walk to-night."

He thrust his hand into the skirts of his coat and pulled out a pair of heavy iron manacles.

"Clap 'em on, William," said he, throwing the manacles on the table.

"Oh, God! Mr. Deacon! Mr. Deacon!" cried Mave, with her first cry of fear.

"No, no, Proudlove. She's safe enough without them," interposed Daniel, blinking uneasily at the manacles. "Put them away, Proudlove, put them away."

"Quite needless," echoed Mr. Mosely.

"As you like. What's safe is what's best, but as you like," assented Proudlove, and he dropped the manacles back into his pocket.

"Put a horse into a cart, my man," he added to George Sheperson, "and bring it round quick. I suppose I shall find my bed some time this blessed night."

George and the old stable-hand left the kitchen, George more in obedience to his wife's glance than to Proudlove's command, and a silence fell on the company. Mr. Mosely and Vincent Proudlove stood by the fire discussing, in a whisper, past triumphs gained by their succesful co-operation. The Man with the Cudgel sprawled on a chair and seemed asleep, while the young fellow William still stood sentinel by Mave. Daniel, who had just before been leaning against the dresser, sidled forward until he stood beside her chair. He stretched out his hand and just touched her on the shoulder, drawing his hand back spasmodically. She turned in the chair, starting quickly, not having heard any one approach, and on seeing him, so cowardly and pitiable, her heart filled with loathing. She could not look scorn, because scorn belonged, with pride and hauteur,

pique and raillery, and all such-like fribbles, to a modern phase of life unknown to her. Mave was of the woodlands, forest grown and dew nurtured, and her emotional capacities were primitively limited. She could love and hate; experience bliss and suffer —this and no more. Daniel saw how deep was her pain, and cowed before her eyes, reproachful and pleading.

"Mave," he whispered hoarsely, "you drove me to this."

She did not answer.

"Mave, I could not lose you. Mave, I love you—you drove me."

She swayed backwards, and only the swift interposition of the young fellow William saved her from falling to the floor. Her hands clutched at her throat.

"Water—I'm dying. Oh, Robert—water."

She lay in the young fellow's arms a dead weight, having swooned. Her senses, strung and maintained at so high a pitch, had relaxed with a sudden jerk, and she was unconscious. Daniel threw himself on his knees and pressed his hot lips to her hands, thought her dead in his madness, and fell to tearing at his hair, whilst uttering maniac lamentations. The man was distraught, and Mosely led him aside, one of the servant-girls and William dashing water into Mave's face. Mrs. Sheperson handed her servant the salts, but would not herself participate in the derogatory task of reviving so disreputable a baggage. Vincent Proudlove watched the scene from his position on the hearth, mildly amused, but perturbed at the attitude of Daniel Deacon, which he was at a loss to satisfactorily explain.

XX

THE CART

WHEN Mave awoke to consciousness she found herself seated on a bed of wet straw at the bottom of a farm waggon. Four men were in the cart beside herself, which was lit by two lanterns, and the lumbering old vehicle, creaking at every jolt, was foul with the stench of tobacco. A slight rain was falling dismally, though the wind was high and the heavens were dark, thick sheets of murky cloud rushing across their starless bosom. Mave felt contentfully dazed but her limbs were stiff and her head aching. She had a dim remembrance of being carried from the inn kitchen and flung on to the straw in the waggon. Also some one had peered over her face, held a lantern to her eyes, and sprinkled her with water. Gradually the events of the evening revitalized themselves in her mind, and she remembered that she had been charged with theft, and was being driven by Mr. Deacon and a law-officer to the gaol-house at Marside. It all seemed outlandish and unnatural. Was she really a thief? She had always thought that the shawl and other few garments which Barbara Deacon had laid aside for her usage had become her own property. Of course she would return them willingly if given the chance. . . . She wondered what the inside of the gaol-house would be like—a cold, dismal dungeon, she suspected, where

she would be starved and whipped at the pleasure of inhuman monsters like Vincent Proudlove. But the dark tapestry of her thoughts, woven in personal wrongs and visioned tortures, was shot through and through with the golden thread of Robert's safety. He, her love, was secure, and in that clear and certain cognition was unfailing comfort. Besides, he would return to the inn, find her departed, and learn the true state of affairs, when he would surely project a plan for rescue. Certainly he would strive to obtain her freedom; but the question arose whether even so redoubtable a person as Robert Trayner could prevail against the bolts and bars of a gaol-house. Even Robert must pale before frowning justice. So thought Mave, terrorized by the panoply of law and officialdom. She had always regarded the powers of law and order with a vague, hardly-to-be-described dread, transmuted perhaps into her blood through hereditary channels, the fear perhaps born of poor Nan O'Moran, who swung high in the long ago, "up Tyburn way." But gradually her thoughts were drawn from contemplating imaginary horrors, pains and penalties, stored for her in the lap of futurity, and her interest was quickened and centred on her fellow-travellers. They spoke in high tones and seemed almost to be quarrelling. Mave sat up in the straw at the back of the waggon to view more narrowly what was happening, but nobody noticed her move.

Seated on the right side of the waggon, his legs outstretched across the floor, sat Vincent Proudlove, and next to him, nearest to the horse, the young fellow William was holding the reins. Immediately opposite to Proudlove crouched Daniel Deacon, the Man with the Cudgel lying full length at his elbow, puffing clouds of smoke from a short, discoloured clay

pipe. The faces of the men were quite plain to Mave beneath the sickly gleam of the lanterns, and she shuddered at their brute visages, all grim, tense, and angered. The shrill pipe of Daniel rose high above the husky oaths of Proudlove, and the two men sat glowering at one another in vengeful dispute. The thief-catcher was stalwart and self-possessed, but Daniel, his arms moving like a windmill, spat out his fury, wild-cat fashion, whilst the Man with the Cudgel puffed contentedly at his pipe and watched the fortunes of the controversy.

"Stop—I have implored and argued enough—I command now—stop, not another step further," cried Daniel, stretching out his hands towards the driver.

"Take no notice of his tantrums—go on Willy. Curse you, dolt. Stow your gab. Whose afraid o' you."

"Stop, I say."

"Say it again. You command! I like that. Faster, Willy, go on."

Proudlove's imperturbable ease stung Daniel to the quick, whilst every step the horse made on the journey narrowed the chances of accomplishing his object.

"I say it shall not be done," he shrilled. "I'm master here. Obey me, Vincent Proudlove, or by God, you shall suffer. Shall I be dared by a dirty thief-catcher—dirt and filth you are. Stop that horse, man."

At this moment Mave saw a horseman cantering towards the waggon. It was Mr. Mosely, who had ridden on a hundred yards before the cart, but on hearing the uproar had turned his horse's head and ridden back in alarm. He pulled up by the vehicle, now brought to a standstill, and thrust his head,

puckered up into innumerable lines of anxious inquiry, into the body of the waggon.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed, "what's the matter, gentlemen? What *has* happened?"

"Did you hear him screaming?" sneered Proudlove, jerking his thumb at Daniel. "Ah, I thought so. What's happened! Why, this dolt, strike me dead, won't have the young woman taken to the lock-up now. Says he'll take her home and reform her. That's what he says. What I say is a different matter. Drive on, Willy. We'll see whose master, my man."

Daniel had risen to his knees.

"The girl shan't go to the lock-up, I say," he cried again. "I've paid you, Vincent Proudlove, and you're my servant."

"The girl's my prisoner. I claim her as such. I don't sleep this night till she's t'other side o' Marside gaol—strike me dead if I do."

Daniel showed his teeth.

"Do it at your peril. By God Almighty, I'll strike you dead myself first."

He thrust his face close to the thief-catcher, who paled before his crazed frenzy. The man seemed witless; his eyes bloodshot, rolling, foam on his lips. William had dropped the reins, whilst Mosely sat glued to his saddle in alarm and amazement.

"Be calm, be calm," he spluttered vainly; but no one heard him.

"To hell with you," thundered Proudlove, in fierce choler; "do you think I fear your threats, you snivelling lap-pup? Drive on, Willy; he shall pay for this, damn me if he don't. No more threats."

Daniel threw up his arms, and the gesture was one of menace.

"Ah, would you," snarled Proudlove; "eat that first, then."

He thrust the nozzle of a huge iron pistol, which he had pulled out of a belt beneath his waistcoat, into Daniel's mouth, and at the cold touch of the weapon Deacon sank back on the straw in a nerveless infatuated horror. Proudlove laughed Homerically, and drummed his heels on the floor of the waggon.

"Had enough, captain?" he sneered; and then dropping into more sullen tones mumbled, "Curse him; who do you think I am to stand their nonsense? Two for the lock-up now instead of one. Daniel Deacon, magistrate and country gentleman, charged with trying to rescue his punk from a law-officer. Ought to mean promotion for your obedient servant. Drive on, Willy, drive on."

He pulled out the manacles from the skirt of his coat and unlocked them, whistling a tune. He felt Daniel was cowed, and that he could save Mave any indignity.

But although Daniel Deacon's constitutional cravenness had quaked when a pistol nozzle smelling of powder had been thrust between his lips, his blood burnt at such heat that in place of intrepidity he was fired with an hysteric desperation, that has given the world out of weaklings spontaneous heroes. The depths of the man seemed replenished with generous oil and his fibres hardened. He felt gloriously confident of his strength, and only his will remained hesitant. He smarted under Proudlove's insults, and when the thief-catcher made play in the lantern-light with "the darbies," his brain thought murder. And he was losing Mave, the woman who was doubly dear, because by him she had been

wronged and persecuted. There was a gloating bliss in torturing the object of one's heart's hunger. He could thrill over her writhings, lamentations, and warm tears. But by Almighty Heaven, she should not be snatched from his grasp and barred from his pleasure behind iron doors. He squatted on the floor of the waggon, rolling his wild eyes and tearing handfuls of the wet, brittle straw. One large thought festered in his mind: how easily could he strike down the thief-catcher if he would turn his head towards the horse. It would be the work of one instant. The man would lay stunned and helpless at his feet. But then there was William to consider, a strong, muscular young fellow, and Mosely. No, he was outnumbered and outranged at every point. He would be overcome in a struggle, and his face perhaps beaten to a pulp. He felt the pistol head already bruising his flesh, and grew shudderingly cold. He was irresolute at that moment, balanced between hate and dread. Natural dastardy, already beginning to cool his blood, would have conquered had it not been for unexpected intervention.

The Man with the Cudgel leaned over towards him.

"Let me light my pipe at your lantern, mister," he said. "Pass it over, thank 'ee."

He pushed the bowl into the lantern flame, and the light fell full upon his strenuous, rugged features, raw-boned, scarred, but granite hewn. The wide slit-like mouth, the square, heavy jowl, and the bushy brows that sheltered sullen fires, showed firm and distinct in the pale glimmer of the lantern. The waggon was jolting, and he had some difficulty to light his pipe, lurching once against Daniel Deacon's shoulders.

"Want a rescue?" Puff—puff—puff.

The words rang distinctly in the gloomy hollow of Daniel's mind, but he stared incredulously at the nondescript, still busy with his pipe, wondering if it could be possible that he had heard aright. The road over which they were travelling seemed in sorry condition, for again the cart jolted, and again the Man with the Cudgel lurched towards Daniel.

"Woa, there! . . . Speak the word, and I'm with you." Puff—puff—puff.

There could be no mistake this time. The man handed the lantern back to Daniel, and their eyes met in a significant glance. Daniel felt suddenly that the balance of strength was on his side. He scrutinized his strange ally with new interest, and saw the mighty chest heave beneath the coarse flannel shirt. The man's arms were leviathan, bulging with muscle, and his hands gnarled, knotted, and enormous. His face, granite-hewn and furrowed like rock scarp, wore that expression of invulnerable passivity which Daniel had once seen on the visage of a great quietened forest beast, scorning him with brutish contempt from behind the bars of a prison cage. Allied to such a force, one could cleave a passage through hordes of Proudloves; and yet Daniel, his heart twingeing, felt scared to give the affirmatory word. The possibilities of the man were so terrifying. It was like putting some dreadful engine of destruction into motion which, once started, would havoc and destroy, whilst the miserable creature, whose weakling hands had given life to the monster, stood powerless to stay the progress of insensate rapine. Daniel stared at the man and hesitated, frightened at the significance that lay on a single word, which he had power to utter. He

was irresolute; many life destinies at the mercy of his coward lips.

Vincent Proudlove shut the manacles with a click, and opening them again, pushed them beneath Deacon's nose.

"Look pretty, don't they?" he growled. "Look pretty, I say, don't they?"

He felt that, having mastered opposition, it was incumbent upon him to air his conquest. Stridently he leant forward, until his red flabby cheeks almost touched Daniel's, and his tiny twinkling eyes danced with base merriment.

"Look pretty, the darbies do, don't they?" he repeated, in a tone that dared Daniel to dissent.

Daniel drew a deep breath, and leant against the side of the waggon.

"Yes," he answered with a slow emphasis on the monosyllable, and he gazed straight into the brute face that watched him from some distance on the other side of the thief-catcher's shoulder.

The Man with the Cudgel laughed. He threw his cudgel into the air, and, although the waggon was proceeding at a decent pace, caught it again, and as the stout wood spun round in his hand, he gave a sharp twist to his wrist and the cudgel head flew straight at Proudlove's skull. But for once the old oak stave missed its mark. Vincent had been a shade the quicker; seeing the movement, he had drawn back, and the cudgel smashed on his left shoulder. He rolled backwards in the waggon away from his antagonist, yelling in pain. His left arm hung lifeless by his side, but with his right he flung the manacles full at the face of the enemy, who dodged and sprang at his fallen foe.

The young fellow William had dropped the reins,

but Daniel closed with him before he could intervene between the two, rolling over on the floor of the waggon. Daniel's nails tore at the fellow's face. He spat on him and strove to stun him by banging his skull against the waggon floor, whilst Proudlove blazed his pistol off at the Man with the Cudgel. The ball whizzed past his cheek. The pistol followed. Proudlove covered his face with his arms, but two blows from the cudgel beat down his guard, and the third knocked him dumb, senseless, his jaw broken. Mosely, hearing the shouts and the pistol report, had ridden up again; but no sooner did he behold the scene than he drove his heels into the horse and fled, screaming for dear life. William remained, half spent and blood-smothered, but still struggling. The Man with the Cudgel quietened him with a tap.

One of the lanterns had gone out in the scuffle, and it was almost dark. Daniel dragged himself to his feet, his lips cut and his wrist strained, and caught at the tall stalwart figure by his side for support.

"Oh, God, are they dead?" he gasped. "Are they dead? Heaven alive, tell me."

"Can't say. I'll see soon, though."

The man stretched across the waggon and unhitched the one still burning lantern from its hook. He lowered it over the faces of the prostrate foes, Daniel peering above his elbow. The face of the thief-catcher was like a blood-sopped sponge and his limbs were stretched stiff and rigid.

Daniel sank on his knees and howled.

"Dead—dear Christ! Dead."

His ally ignored him, stooping low, his hand pressed on the prostrate man's heart.

"Still beating," said he. "Spoilt his beauty, though, for ever."

"You say he lives? You are sure of it? Oh, God be thanked, a merciful God," cried Daniel, flinging out his arms to heaven.

The Man with the Cudgel was interested in his strange confederate. It was a novel companionship. Daniel grovelled on his knees, shaking in convulsive tremors, his face uplifted and pitifully awful, its ashen flesh painted with blood and sweat and grime from the waggon flooring. His red hair was torn, his clothing rent and his eyes fixed, staring in idiot grief. The Man with the Cudgel shook him heavily.

"What matters if he be alive or dead? It's hanging for us anyway, once we're caught," he mumbled, and proceeded to examine William. "This cove will be dancing in an hour," said he, and put the lantern down, but on second consideration raised it again and stepped over to the rear of the cart.

Mave lay in the straw on her face, her hands clenched and her heart slowly beating. He turned her over, a dead weight, and saw her lips grey and her cheeks white to deathliness. She did not stir or even moan, but lay in brief oblivion from the world's revolving maze of sound and fury in the deep slumber of a dreamless swoon—a swoon that was in likeness featured quietly with the cold peace of sister death.

"It's the way o' gels," said the Man with the Cudgel; "better faint than scream, though."

"Has she fainted?" asked Daniel, who had crawled across the waggon.

"Yes—leave her, man."

"Look, look, she might be dead."

"Naught o' the sort. Come now, help us; shovel 'em out."

He pointed to the bodies of Proudlove and his assistant, but Daniel recoiled. His novice hands were palsied, never before having dabbled in blood pools, and being by nature abler fitted for the quill trade than the strenuous art of cracking skulls. He wrung his hands, rubbed them with imaginary soap and water, and stared stupidly from the prostrate bodies to his confederate, who was busy relighting his pipe at the lantern. The Man with the Cudgel shifted the bodies to the edge of the cart, sprang out himself, dragged the bodies out singly and heaved them over the wayside hedge.

"Best make a move now," said he with a grin, puffing his smoke into the face of Daniel, who watched his movements morbidly. "Best make a move—fork out."

Daniel did not understand, until the man thrust out a hand beneath his chin with an unmistakable gesture.

"Fork out—come down handsome. A toughish job, but done neat, I'll swear."

Daniel felt in his pockets, terrified at this new turn of affairs.

"I have no money—only a guinea," he stammered, sidling back into the waggon.

It was now the turn of the Man with the Cudgel to show astonishment. Naturally dull-witted and slow of comprehension, his features typified in turn every shade of bewilderment. Movement in him was suspended. He held the pipe three inches from his open mouth, while he inwardly repeated Daniel's words. Daniel, with the inspiration of terror, saw that there was not a moment to lose. The numbness of astonishment would fade from the ruffian's brain; he would be galvanized to life by an infuriated lust

for vengeance. Daniel felt as though every bone in his body had already been beaten to a pulp. In deadly fear he seized occasion by the forelock.

"I have no money in my pocket, I mean," he said, forcing a high laugh. "I have fifty guineas waiting for you at home, and more if you want them, my friend."

The man's face cleared somewhat; but he still scowled, ignorantly suspicious, but turning the position of affairs over in his slow brain. Send Daniel the way of Vincent Proudlove and he gained a guinea. Hold his hand, and the future was brightened by the prospect of fifty golden pieces. It had never been his good fortune to act in collusion with a confederate of Deacon's character; a coward, but a gentleman and rich to boot, and he recognized that if the present opportunity was not put to the best advantage there was small likelihood of such another coming his way this side of eternity. True, he would never have embarked upon so desperate an enterprise had he not been confident of instant and substantial remuneration, so that he could have cleared the country before the hue and cry was raised. He had been deceived, forced into an uncomfortable corner; but he would not better the position in any way by squeezing the life out of Deacon's body. One thing at least was clear, and that was the advisability of making a swift transit from the scene of crime before Mosely returned with a crowd of runners. To Daniel's surprise, the Man with the Cudgel did not answer one way or the other his speech about the fifty guineas at home, but jumped up to the seat on the waggon, seized the reins, turned the horse's head, and with many strange cries, and blows from William's whip, forced the animal into a gallop.

"We can talk better now, my pal," said he; "you see, I should never have run in this race if I had not been sure you were flush with yennum. If you'd come down handsome on the spot, I could have cleared before the cry is raised. Can't now. What was your game, pal? Know how to take care of yourself?"

Daniel looked at him blankly and shook his head.

"I had no thought of anything," he said.

"Curse me! Were you going straight to the kink?"

"I should have gone home. It would be best now, I think—we could both reach my house in about an hour."

"And find 'em waiting for us at the door. Curse me, Daniel Deacon, you're crazed in a job like this. Do you want to swing?"

Daniel shivered and felt his throat, at which the Man with the Cudgel laughed outright.

"Daniel Deacon," said he, "this is the first time you've done a deal with Nat Avershaw. Play me false, and I'll strip your bones clean. Curse me, I will."

"I won't, I won't; you shall have the fifty guineas."

"I'll ask for 'em when I get 'em. Lie quiet now. Only understand, if the time should come when you're free to fork out, it's your life or the pieces."

Nat Avershaw relapsed into dogged silence, apparently forgetting the very existence of Daniel, and goading the horse forward by every means in his power. Daniel noticed that the rain still lightly drizzled, and the clouds swept in ebony shreds over the skies. He crept to the rear of the waggon and

crouched on his knees by the side of Mavè, smoothed back her hair, and huddled a bundle of straw into an improvised pillow. Now that action was suspended, and the heat and tension of conflict evaporated, he felt limp, and his blood ran thinly. As yet he could not fully realize the savage straits to which he had been reduced, the perils of outlawry, endured to the grim music of swinging gibbet-chains. He had been so suddenly impelled from even pastoral estate into the bosom of catastrophe, that he was as yet stunned by the impetus of the fall. As he looked down on Mave and heard her moan, in that dim condition between consciousness and swooning, he was touched by generous compassion for all the fretting figures that strutted through the play of her life. He sorrowed for her, for his wife, for himself, and even at that moment of tender reaction for Robert Trayner. They all seemed so powerless beneath the stress of exterior destiny; driven in the wind's way, and without alternative to do aught but groan through allotted parts in a dark, lusty drama. Mave was the inspiring source of all the travail; the spark that ignited these rebellious fires, and as such he should hate her, loathe and exterminate her, as an evil thing breathing corruption. But as he gazed upon her, lying in the straw at the bottom of George Sheperson's waggon, whilst he gradually recognized the unscalable depths of his own degradation, the living truth of his passion obscured his horror. He had journeyed so far from the clear heights, now veiled and lost midst hot chaotic fumes; he had sunk, waded so deep through ooze and mire in the wake of a perfervid glamour that he knew his infatuated madness immedicable. He must go on midst devil-chant and ceaseless torture to the end. At the

gallows' foot he would love Mave. He glanced up and saw that Nat Avershaw had left the former route, and was proceeding at a good level pace along an inland road, intersecting two wide stretches of uncultivated land, wild in aspect and studded with gorse.

"Where are we driving?" he asked in some trepidation.

"Lie quiet."

"We are journeying from Marside."

"Lie quiet."

Daniel for a few moments complied to Nat Avershaw's request, but the darkness of the night, the starless heavens, the murky shreds of ebon cloud, and the desolate scene around oppressed him with a sense of epic danger. He thought of William and Vincent Proudlove lying stiff and bruised beneath the drizzling rain. He wondered if life was extinct in the thief-catcher, and whether Mosely had yet raised the alarm. Silence was overwhelming, and not to be endured.

"Are we pursued, do you think?" he ventured.

"No."

"You don't think so. God be thanked!"

"I don't think, I know it."

"Lord have mercy—hurry on—hurry on, man! When the morning comes we shall be as good as lost."

"Lie quiet," mumbled Nat Avershaw.

XXI

IN THE WILD

MAVE was lying at full length by the side of a small wood fire, her head and shoulders enveloped in the shawl and a good layer of straw betwixt her body and the moist earth. The rain had ceased temporarily to fall, and the skies, washed clean of stars, were tinctured with a pale grey, across which background the shredded clouds coursed rapidly in sable tatters. The girl roused herself and took stock of her surroundings. The wood fire, spluttering somewhat in the wet, burnt steadily, and on the further side squatted Daniel, drinking from a tin pannikin, but Nat Avershaw and the waggon were nowhere to be seen. The environs of the encampment were thickly wooded, the spot itself being the bottom glade of a sort of wide forest pit. Its four undulating inclines fledged thick with trees, which graduating downward in sparsity, finally gave place to gorse and shrubberies. It was on a little triangular patch of stubble that the fire had been built between three furze-like bushes, imbedded in a narrow three-quarter circle of mud-coloured water, which seemed at either end to flow down into subterranean channels. These were near to the surface, though, for at some little distance Mave noticed the water again, and indeed the whole place had the dismal appearance of a swampish quagmire. She gazed up at the dense trees rising gradually one

above the other, the topmost branches of the furthest row showing against the sky at a great eminence, and their barks and naked branches all black, rain-drenched and indescribably wretched beneath the wan, cheerless dawn. The girl shivered, every bone on ache, stretched out her hands to the fire-blaze, and watched the thin blue smoke curl upwards in spiral columns. Daniel, himself limp and ragged, with an almost grotesque drowned-rat air, noticed her move but did not venture to speak. The pannikin clattered between his teeth, and he looked anywhere but in her eyes. She herself, numbed in mind and body, lay on her side by the spluttering fire, curiously quiescent, grateful for a little warmth, and not greatly perturbed as to the means by which she had been transported to her present destination. She felt nothing acutely, owned no vital interests. She was miserable, but in repose, and the world's alarums sounded far and indistinct. Nothing was certain to her but a vague acknowledgment that she loved Robert Trayner. Even Robert was a dim figure flitting on her mind's horizon, the personification of something she loved with dogged animal instinct, but remote beyond a hurricane of brawl and riot. Her mind was expressionless, and she was more clearly conscious of aching bones and chill shivering fits than any mental torment. She remembered the dreadful scene in the waggon—the fight, the curses, and the face of Vincent Proudlove when the cudgel crashed down on his jaw, the bone bare and the flesh torn to tatters; but she could not ponder on these things, and they dissolved like chimeras, leaving her tired and sick with drowsy horror. Suddenly the two bushes behind Daniel parted, and the face of Nat Avershaw, the fur hat tilted over his left eye,

peered through them and grinned. The man emerged, seemed to step straight from the thick of the bush, and flung himself down by the fire. He threw a scarf over his face, and was composing his limbs for sleep, when Daniel leant forward and touched him on the shoulder.

"Are we safe? Tell me, are we safe?" he pleaded.

"Ay, safe as we can be," grunted Nat.

"They will not find us?"

"It will cost 'em hard if they do."

"Oh, dear God, if I had thought twice, this would have been saved."

"Lie quiet."

Nat Avershaw snored, lost to all thought of danger in the easy slumber of the brute. Daniel fidgeted with the pannikin, and glanced now and again timorously towards Mave. He could see her face plainly by the firelight, pale and drawn with an agonized serenity that shocked him more deeply than any words, vain tears, or piteous groans. He must speak to her, explain somewhat the troubled course of the night's events. Silence in this vast and desolate solitude oppressed him with a nameless dread. He felt that he must shriek and blubber in delirious fear of yawning quietude.

"Mave," he whispered at length, "Mave, can you hear me?"

"Yes," she answered, and her voice was toneless.

"Mave, Mave, what has happened to us all? Oh, God Almighty, it's all like some hideous nightmare. Mave, do you know what I am?"

She made no reply.

"Mave, I'm an outlaw, a creature hunted by justice; a villain, perhaps a murderer. If they catch me, I shall swing upon the gallows."

She offered no rejoinder, hearing his words faint and almost meaningless. She saw his wild looks, his miserable, terror-stricken mien, but was not inspired by even a passing interest. She observed him as a fact, a thing that was, a part of the scene like the trees and furze-bushes. But he roused no emotions, for her heart was shut.

"Mave, Mave," he whimpered again, thrusting back some stray embers into the fire, "do you remember what I was when we first met that morning, when Trayner brought you to my house? I was contented, Mave, honoured and respected. Do you remember?"

"Yes," she answered, fingering with the two guineas Joseph Hissey had knotted in the corner of her shawl, and wondering where was old Joseph Hissey now and Jacob. She remembered them more vividly than the roar and scuffle of the frightful conflict in the waggon.

"Mave, I loved God then," whispered Daniel; "I was at peace with God. Mave, you came between me and God. You ruined my soul. I was mad for you, Mave. You took everything from me——"

"Yes," she answered, because he paused.

"You think me cruel, I know. You think I am vile—that I have persecuted and wronged you. Think—think—Mave, out of pity think—how you have wronged me. You think me vile, Mave, because when you fled from me I pursued you. I accused you of being a thief. I insulted and upbraided you. It is true. Oh, I know it, and every word I then said was a lie. But, Mave, it was the only way I had of reclaiming you—the only way I had of compelling you to return. That was at the back of my actions, Mave darling, although when I found you had gone I was mad with rage, beside myself, because

I knew you had gone to Robert Trayner. I swore I would possess you or die, Mave. I could not live hungering for you, groaning for the slightest touch of you every minute of my life, and knowing that you were lost to me and in the arms of Trayner. Oh, Mave, it is hell to me to know that he has kissed your lips; to know—to know that you love him—that you would sell your very soul for him whilst you despise me, despise and hate me—I, even I, who have sweated blood for you, Mave—I, even I, who am doomed to hell for you, Mave—think of it—for ever and ever—eternity."

He was choked by the inadequacy of speech. His words jumbled forth at lava heat and at torrential pace, but his torment remained in no degree expressed. Mave was unmoved, having reached the stone æon of suffering. When Daniel mustered strength to resume, it was in a sobered strain of narrative rather than that of the heart's romance.

"I must tell how I came to wrong you so. I must talk, Mave, I must talk—it eases me—you will let me talk to you—I am more wretched than you, Mave—please listen to me. . . . Well, when I found you had gone, as I said, I was determined to recover you. I went straight to the market town, and put the case before an attorney there. He knew all about you, Mave, having been a friend of Trayner's, and he showed me that there was only one way in which I could compel you to return. I was not your legal guardian, Mave. The attorney accompanied me at once to Vincent Proudlove. We went there on his suggestion. Proudlove joined us. We were sure you had gone on the London Road—I knew that—I knew it bitterly, Mave, because the London Road would take you to Trayner. We stopped and

questioned everybody we met, and this fellow here said he had seen a young woman, answering to the description we gave, alight with an old man from a cart, at an inn, in the early evening. We needed no further knowledge, and as this man, Nat, offered to direct us to the inn, we took him with us. When I saw you, Mave, I can't express what I felt—I will not try to—I can't. I seemed to be split by rival passions. I could have tortured you, yet I longed to kiss your lips. Then the landlord I thought would frustrate us. I was afraid and maddened. I insulted you, Mave, then heaped vile accusations on you in the hope that he would relinquish his efforts. I forget what I said, Mave. I was deranged."

He paused again, swallowed his spittle, and pushed back his tangled locks, crouching forward over the fire, and stretching out a tentative hand towards Mave, who was immured in miserable repose. He drew the hand back through the smoke, awed by the girl's face, as it was revealed to him by the now lifting dawn. What had happened to her? They had all suffered, striven through turmoil and darkness; none had risen scathless from the night's Titanic havoc. One and all—Trayner, the thief-catcher, Mosely, Nat Avershaw, and himself—had suffered in some measure. His own wounds gaped, and naught would close their scarlet mouths but grave dust. He was sick beyond the finite limits of human succour; past the ingenuity of mortal leech, and exorcised from the healing balm of spiritual peace beneath the passion subjugating wings of infinite God. So he had been crying out in his agony, which was natural and understandable, but Mave—Mave was becalmed. Her attitude was listless, her looks vacant.

"The fire will be out," said she, after a long spell of silence, "it is still cold."

She stooped and threw a faggot into the smouldering glow, and Daniel lifted a small heap of dry broken wood on to the little flame. Mave watched the fire rekindle, and carefully pushed the twigs to such an angle that the flame would catch them. But she showed no pleasure when they ignited.

"How did this wood come here?" she asked presently, examining a strip of fine dry bark.

"He—he hid it beneath the bushes; there is a hollow there where one can lie quite snug. He hides here, Mave."

"There is no hollow there—nothing but water."

"No, no, the other side of the water. The bush spreads out over the hollow, it is a little cave, warm and dry."

Her interest had evaporated in the hollow, and she began idly stripping the bark again.

"What sort of wood is this?" she asked, after another lapse of silence.

"Ash wood—the best for fire-making, he says. He lives here sometimes."

Mave glanced at the huge limbs of Nat Avershaw, stretched out on the stubble. She could hear him snoring, and his maimed hand grasped the cudgel in its split fingers. The handkerchief had dropped from his face, and the brute brows and leonine jaws jutted out in repellant prominence, but even the sight and proximity of Nat could not inspire their customary horror in her breast. Even he could not break the continuous stupor through which everything appeared to her natural and ordained. He aroused less interest than the crooked bough of a beech tree curved fantastically in a treble bow. Mave had ceased to

marvel at the form or existence of anything, but the bough of the beech tree held her attention. She had waded through fiery waters and, strange as it may seem, might have sat a spiritual sister to Barbara Deacon, in the days of her quietude, when Barbara had not yet reached the further side of the molten lake possessed by the dark passions. True, Mave had no woolwork to engage her thought, but the crooked bough of a beech tree sufficed in full.

This inviolate calm was rendering Daniel desperate. It was worse that anger, more invincible than hate. He could make no further headway against it than did the foam-spewing waves that gurgled, rushed and battened, against some smooth scarped promontory, looking out majestically across the sea.

"Mave, tell me of what are you thinking?" he pleaded. "Tell me, Mave."

"I am cold."

"You feel cold?"

"Very."

"But what are you thinking of, Mave?"

"Thinking of—nothing—little enough, an old cloak I left at Miss Wardale's. It would warm me now."

"Mave, your feet must be like ice. Your shoes are drenched—look—sopped with water—they must be dried at the fire. Let me take them off, Mave. Oh, please do, I beg of you just let me take them off for you—unfasten them—I shall be grateful—just let me."

She did not deny him his request, and he flung himself down prostrate before her, and drew the tiny shoes, soft as pulp with rain, from her numbed feet. She did not resist, indeed, hardly seemed to notice his action, neither did she see his lips compress and two tears glimmer over the gem-like sparkle of his

eyes. He crawled back to his side of the fire, carrying her shoes, and held them close to the flame. He saw Mave's head droop in very weariness, and she drowsed for a few minutes, whilst he hugged the shoes into his bosom. . . . When Mave stirred again, and opened her eyes, neither Daniel nor Nat Avershaw had shifted their positions, though the day was quite clear now, and a few birds on the gaunt tree-tops piped out shrilly over the withered hedge and dripping gorse to the slattern morn.

"How did we ever come here?" asked Mave, shivering again.

"He brought us," answered Daniel, glancing at Nat; "he hides here often. No one knows this place —we are safe here, he says—only here; they will be hunting everywhere for us."

"The waggon has gone," she remarked.

"Yes, yes; we could not bring it here. Besides, it would not have been safe——"

"Safe," she reiterated for the first time in a little wonderment.

Daniel gazed at her in amazement. Was it possible she had forgotten what had happened, and did not realize their straits of danger?

"Mave," he whispered, "you remember the fight—when—when I would not let you go to Marside gaol."

"Yes, I remember. In the waggon."

"Mave, a price is on our heads. We are being hunted. We are outlawed fugitives from justice. If we are caught, nothing but the gallows waits us."

Her eyes opened wider, and at last a glint of fear shot through her mind's dark curtain. She glanced nervously, curiously rather than in apprehension, at the bushes and the thick trees covering the precipitous sides of the earth basin in which they had pitched

their encampment. But the sudden sense of indefinable danger did not ruffle her tranquil acceptance of all existent things, no matter what their shape or product. That she should be obliged to run the perils of outlawry, suffer further contumely at the hands of obdurate fortune, and be faced by the prospect of drear travel by chain and flail—driven through dungeon causeways, whose muffled gloom uplifted only on the gallows tree, seemed to her a peculiar combination of unhappy circumstances, but things being so disposed and she herself having no hand in weaving the dark fabric of destiny, her part was plain endurance. To kick against the pricks was abject folly, resulting in nought but additional hurt and needless wounds. This manner towards life had settled upon Mave and remained constant; lifting slightly at times and on occasion deepening, but never once did the ashes of fierce rebellion revivify in her heart's urn. Insensibly she was exterior to herself, and watching the dark passage of life's transit, her own figure nigh lost in the weeping multitude that went the way of darkness, aggrandising by their plaints and sad afflictions immortal Sorrow, the soul's eternal verity, the end and the beginning, the common womb of the earth race, and the sepulchre of their repose. Mave simply made reverent obeisance to Sorrow, and her quiescence was worship, but she had no pageantry of thought and did not understand her own idolatry.

"Do you think we shall be hanged?" she asked Daniel, as one wishful to know the ultimate end of a journey.

"Mave, don't talk so. It is horrible. No, they will never catch us. He—he will save us, be assured."

In the bosom of catastrophe men stand at primitive

value, and Daniel Deacon, scholar, theorist and gentleman, was subservient to a ruffian bully. Nat Avershaw was his captain; one to be followed with blind trust; in whose ingenuity rested the only hope for Mave and himself. He looked down on the giant recumbent form of Nat and saw him move. He growled, shifted to his elbows, rubbed his eyes and surveyed the surroundings.

"It's clear day," said he, in surprise.

"Yes. You have slept hours."

"Are you mad, Daniel Deacon, that you sit there in the daylight. You should have roused me, man. Curse me, if I don't think you've got a taste for a high swing."

He jumped up, stretched his arms and shook off the lethargy of recent sleep, immediately stamping out the last sparks of the crumbled fire. He scattered the ashes with his foot, and covered the small patch of charred stubble where the fire had burnt with the tree's boughs. Then he seized the pannikin and pointed towards the bushes.

"Carry her in," he said, jerking his head in the direction of Mave, but the girl had risen to her feet.

"Follow me—look alive, Daniel Deacon," said he, and led the way through the bushes.

The party stepped across the ditch in which the bushes were rooted, now half filled with stagnant water, and on the further side Nat Avershaw crawled on his knees through what had the appearance of an enormous rabbit-hole while Daniel held the bush aside. Mave followed, and then Daniel, and the bush swung back across the mouth of the hiding-place. Mave was in utter darkness and, when kneeling, her head just touched the cavern roof. But the soil was tolerably dry, feeling like clay, and she lay down, the shawl for a pillow, and slept.

XXII

THE EXPULSION

NIGHT came down on the forests, night moonless and starless, with a great wind soughing through the trees. Three figures crouched over the wood fire, Nat Avershaw, Daniel, and Mave, her head drooping and shadowed from the firelight. The shawl round her shoulders was tattered and her feet bare. Her shoes had gone a week ago, rain sopped, fire blistered and broken, the stockings, poor things at the best, had soon followed. Mave drowsed, and neither of the men spoke, each hiding in the silence from the other. Three weeks had spelt out their leaden moments, but fate had not done with our fugitives, and had even penetrated through the tangled woods and dense shrubberies to this dingle marsh.

The pursuit had run hot. Every town, village, and stretch of country had been scoured, even the adjoining wood beaten, and a heavy price had been put on the heads of the outlaws. Bills describing Nat and Daniel, and offering remuneration for their capture, had been posted right and left, at which every thief and vagrant in the country, who could read, stared, whistling for the rewards. Proudlove was maimed and disfigured for life; death at one time seeming inevitable, but he had found his

legs and was prominent in the hunt. The man lay awake at night gorging his brain on tortures, and his insatiable malignance almost terrified his comrades, whilst his constant ingenuity and unwavering indomitable perseverance astonished them. Every conceivable device that could possibly lead to the aprehension of Nat and his accomplice was put in execution. Not a haunt of vileness was left unransacked; the ports were watched, and even the rat-holes in the London borough probed for the fugitives. Vincent Proudlove himself, however, stuck to a conviction that the men still lurked in the vicinity, and blood-hounds were employed, but the scent had gone in the wind. The animals at every attempt arrived where the horse and waggon had been discovered, but once there, seemed at a complete loss to continue the pursuit. The brutal outrage—attempted murder of a law officer—formed the one topic of conversation at the period in England. The peculiar circumstances of the crime and the remarkable character of one of the miscreants, himself a magistrate, of benevolent repute, and known as a man of strong if eccentric religious principles, excited the profoundest interest in all classes of the community. My lord bet on the affair at his club. My lady discussed its sentimental side with her friends; and ballad sheets describing the crime in lyric form flavoured at times obscenely, found a ready market in the meaner street; and imaginary portraits of Daniel Deacon, Esquire, gentleman and Justice of the Peace, his harlot, the woman O'Moran, and Nat Avershaw, a wretch of the lowest order, could also be purchased for a modest sum. All persons connected in the remotest degree with the affair enjoyed a reflected

notoriety, Mr. Mosely being in constant demand, although his recital of personal braveries, combat with the intended murderers, and general exposition of desperate valour, was directly at variance to the narratives of Vincent Proudlove and his assistant William. Barbara Deacon shut herself within the four walls of her house, veiling her naked wounds from the morbid eye and the grating dust of pity. The house was kept by Proudlove's orders under constant surveillance, he holding to a theory, generally accounted unworthy of credence, that sooner or later Daniel would slink back to his former home. In such wise fared the outside world after a lapse of three weeks, but all was quiet and unruffled in the solitude of the forest dingle where Mave and the two men starved and grovelled from the light of day.

During the first two weeks Nat made nightly excursions into the neighbouring woods, sometimes even penetrating to the more unfrequented roads, occasionally snaring a rabbit or bird, but generally experiencing poor sport. He was at home in the forests, climbing like a squirrel, and possessed of a woodland creature's genius for finding cover, but on several occasions he came near to being detected. The lust of hunger was constantly freezing on the vitals of the three miserable beings. Mave was wasting, and Daniel had grown more wild-eyed and haggard than ever. Now even Avershaw was gaunt beneath the high cheekbones. He would sit for hours sucking at the stem of his cold pipe, blazing hatred at Daniel from beneath his knit fierce brows. At first the man had talked, Nat evincing a disposition to narrate experiences of the past and disposed to take a hopeful view of the situation, but latterly they

had sat in silence on either side of the fire, and cursed each other with their eyes.

Daniel sat motionless and apparently half asleep, but in reality watching Nat Avershaw's slightest movement. It had been thus for the last three days Daniel aware that the final stage had been reached, and terror-stricken by fear of attack. Nat's passion was a fire concealed in shade, smouldering unseen, but liable to break in flame at any moment. Daniel knew this, and indeed the two men's souls were bare to one another, but as yet neither had spoken. Now and again Daniel would glance at Mave, still drowsing and becalmed, and in her he saw the source of all his anguishment, his dreadful hurtling from the clear heights into the abysmal pits of degradation. How he cursed his passion, reviling it because it burnt unfalteringly and gripped him even at the last gasp. It was unreasonable, incredible that a man should be so afflicted, so possessed!

Yet he had long passed that period when he had wrestled with himself and striven for the mastery of his soul. He had been worsted, and there was some peace in acknowledging defeat, in baring the breast to the victor, in remaining immobile while the conqueror worked its will. Passion had desolated, abased him, and yet he gloried in his passion. Three nights ago, when the moon had been clear and bright, he had been startled at a curious expression of intent wonder on the tempest face of Avershaw the giant. The brute features were stilled, the muscles lax, and the wrathful eyes soft and velvety. The horrid lips were moist and parted, and the man sat in a hunched-up attitude, his chin resting on his knees, and seemed bound by a spell. Daniel, startled and fluttering at the heart, followed the direction of his gaze. He

looked straight on the weary face of Mave, glamoured and fay-like in the moonbeams, as she lay on the remnants of the straw and smiled wanly in her sleep. Daniel had not dared to speak, but sat breathless, suffering excruciating torment and the limits of diabolic hate. He cursed Avershaw with his eyes then, and the man's head turned with a sluggish movement and gave him look for look. In that look they were discovered to one another, and had since hardly exchanged words. But hell had raged in the silence; souls had been consumed; Mave becalmed, not counting; and the forest pit became the habitation of beasts, men in the wild, devoured by carrion torments, starved, but hot with primal lusts and tiger savagery. Nat Avershaw had long ago dismissed all hope for the fifty guineas; he had nothing to gain further from Daniel, and daily the conviction grew stronger in him that there would be no escape. Sooner or later his bones would bleach in gibbet-chains. He was at bay, and would appease the last cry of his blood. As for Daniel, he should be rended if he moved a hand; it would be nothing more than child's play to grind his heel upon that coward face, until its offending eyes were squelched from sight in ditch ooze. The extermination of Daniel would be a moment's work; the man could be obliterated; but Nat Avershaw was afraid of Mave. She sat so silent, and the ruffian was oppressed by the mystery of quietude's smile and was awed. Apart from this he knew Daniel to the heart, and for the last three days had disappeared into the woods when he wished to sleep, although this practice had its own danger, the possibilities of the hunters stumbling on their quarry. But had he slept, as before, near the wood fire or in the little cavern beneath the bush, he knew it would

be a sleep without waking. Daniel's nervous fingers would have steeled to strangle him or to drive the horn-handled knife between his ribs. He returned from these expeditions at the most unexpected times, suddenly emerging from the woods, vampire fashion, in the hope that he would discover both Mave and Daniel slumbering, when he could despatch his work and have done with the body while the girl slept. Mave never questioned, and he would have told her that Daniel had gone into the forests and had fallen in with the hunters. But Daniel had been always awake when Nat returned, he also knowing sleep to spell certain death. He had had the thought of flight with Mave on the occasions of Nat's absence, but flight meant capture, and he was a coward. So he suffered and waited for the end. And to-night, as he sat shivering over the fire while the March winds blustered and ebon clouds enveloped the dark heavens, he felt, with something of Robert Trayner's dramatic submission to environment, that the end was near.

Nat Avershaw put his pipe back into his pocket and replenished the fire with wood. He leant forward and held his hands above the flame, darting quick glances at Daniel, and humming a catch to himself. Daniel quavered, but preserved a steady gaze, his eyes bright as ever. Mave started and awoke, and as the dream faded into barren reality, moaned and shook with a fit of coughing. She drew to the fire, but neither of the men let their eyes stray for an instant. Nat Avershaw hummed more loudly, and began to beat a tattoo on his foot with a strip of ash wood which he cut daily and dried for purposes of fuel. Suddenly he cast the wood aside, and laughed.

"Daniel Deacon," said he, "are you awake?"

"Yes," answered Daniel, clasping his knees.

"Can this go on?"

"This? What?"

"This starvation. Curse me, I'd rather swing with a full belly than suffer this."

Daniel was in no way deceived. He made no reply, but sat steadfast waiting for the other to disclose the core of his verbiage.

"There is food out there," growled Nat, jerking his thumb towards the forest.

"In the woods?"

"In the towns, in the villages. Meat and drink. there; naught here."

"True, there is meat and drink there, in the towns, but for us death also."

"And death here too."

Avershaw crouched forward, having risen to his knees, so that his brute head looked out through the fire smoke. Daniel shrank back, reading the menace and knowing it to be no idle threat. His coward heart pounded like a drum-beat on his ribs and his face worked convulsively. He was a mazed creature, smitten by hate, oppressed by terror, and only capable of the worm's twist and wriggle beneath the prong. Avershaw's right arm was extended, the split fingers pointing towards the woods and what lay beyond.

"There is meat and drink for us for the fetching," he said. "Curse me, it must be fetched."

His design had exploded now. He was expelling Daniel, offering him the alternatives of flight and death. His great head shone lurid in the fire's glow, and the beast jaws were distorted in a smile, the snarl before the spring.

"Go, Daniel Deacon, go now," he whispered

hoarsely, "go, fetch us meat and drink. She—she's starving."

Daniel dared not look at Mave. Had he done so he would have clung to her skirts and cried out for her merciful intercession. He whimpered and smiled drear.

"It—means death for me," he whined; "you know that, Nat—there's no escape. Once out there and it means death."

"Curse me, no more words, go; no more words, Danny Deacon, go."

"It means death—it means the gallows, Nat. Oh, my God!"

"There's death here for such as you, Danny Deacon. Curse me, if you stay I'll strip your bones clean, as I swore before."

The man's passion was rising to sullen fury, and he sprang to his feet with an oath. He strode, scowling across the fire, and Daniel rolled over on his back, screaming terror.

"Don't—don't! spare me, Nat! Oh, mother! mother! spare me, Nat! Don't, for God's sake!"

The ruffian lurched forward, seized him by the shoulder and dragged him, limp and rat-like, to his feet. He shook him violently and the ashen face jerked backwards, the eye-balls staring, and the red-gold hair fluttered in the wind.

"Oh, mother—mother! Oh, God, spare me! Mave, speak."

The girl gave a long sighing moan, but uttered no word. Nat Avershaw flung Daniel from him with a curse. He fell, a limp and helpless mass, midst the thorns and brambles of the bushes, and when at last he staggered to his feet he showed his hands and face lacerated and bleeding.

"Will you go, Danny Deacon?" questioned Avershaw, protruding his lower jaw.

"Yes, yes, I'll go, Nat—you were too hasty, Nat; I'll go. One moment—one minute—I'll go."

"Go now. Curse me, I won't stand waiting."

Nat made a step forward, and Daniel retreated precipitously, stumbling backward past the bushes. He could run swift, and felt safer now.

"I'll go and fetch the meat and drink," said he breathlessly. "I'll go, Nat—she shan't starve. If I don't return, you know they've caught me."

Nat stared at him, a foul epithet on his lips, stung by what he deemed impudent fooling. On second thoughts he only laughed, joining in the humour of the farce. Return indeed! Little he'd see of Danny Deacon again, the white-livered numskull. Of a surety, earth would suffer a revolution before that cringing hound slunk back to meet the knife's point. He laughed loudly and picked up his cudgel, Daniel still whimpering behind the bushes.

"Mave, Mave—good-bye; Mave, oh, Mave, I'll try and get the meat for you, Mave," he cried.

Mave looked towards the bushes, her lips parted on the long sighing moan. Then she covered her face and wept for the first time since the fight in the waggon. Nat Avershaw flung himself down again in his former seat, and fell to his old pastime of flinging his cudgel high and catching it. He heard Daniel's footsteps gradually recede and his bleating cry grow fainter in the distance. Presently all was quiet again, only the fire crackled round new fuel and the trees shook in the winds sough. Nat laid aside his cudgel and observed Mave, feeling curiously restrained and at a loss for words.

"He's gone," he said after a long pause, when she had dried her tears.

"Yes."

"He will not find the meat and drink though—Danny Deacon's gone for good."

Her eyes opened wide, and she shook her head.

"Gone for good?"

"Yes—gone gallows way, most likely."

Again she shook her head.

"Curse me, if you don't doubt me," cried Nat, laughing.

"I don't doubt you."

"What, then?—you don't seem believing."

She stretched out her arms and yawned.

"He will return," said she, calmly certain.

"Return! Not he—not Danny Deacon."

"You will see. He will return."

"You're crazed. Return!"

Her passive attitude of certainty roused his ire, and with any other person he would have brawled in high fury. He stretched himself out on the stubble, head foremost, resting his chin between his hands and gazing up at her, stilled by curious enchantment.

"Do you know why he has gone?" he whispered, his eyes soft and velvety, searching her frail body and the moonshine face.

"Yes," she answered, and his gaze was returned.

Nat Avershaw gave a low whistle. The tone of her voice told him what he had never suspected—that she knew the full purport of his designs. He felt abashed before her incomprehensible serenity.

"You know, then," he repeated.

"Yes."

"And he knows too—Danny Deacon knows."

"Yes, he knows too."

"He knows it's death for him to return."

"Yes, he knows that."

"Curse me! Yet you think——"

"He will come back."

"Naught o' the sort. Danny Deacon loves his skin—a coward, eh!"

"Yes, a coward."

Nat scratched his head.

"And yet——"

"He will come back—he must."

"God alive! Come back! Come back for death!"

"Yes, for death."

"And why? But Danny's a coward. Don't he squeal at a touch?"

"Yes, but he will return."

"And why?" thundered Nat, maddened by her persistence.

"Because he knows I am here with you."

"You mean that? God alive, girl, you're crazed! You mean that?"

"Yes."

"You mean he'll come back for the knife?"

As the last word fell from his lips, he stretched out his hand to the tin pannikin where the horn knife had rested. It had gone. Mave noticed his gesture, and as he looked up inquiringly at her, having searched in vain all round the pannikin and even in the fire, he saw the blade of the knife glint between the folds of her tattered shawl. She sat rigid as stone, her hair just caught by the wind's going, whilst her lips quivered.

"Don't touch me!—oh, God!—don't touch me!" said she, and he saw the knife tremble in her grasp.

He was silenced and awestruck. He marvelled

that the drowsing girl had so perfectly divined his temper, had in her apparent slumbers seen his mind's lurid background which he had prided himself lay so cunningly concealed. He valued her at true estimate, and knew that the first fondling touch meant a stab to the heart, and he did not offer to move. Silenced, he lay for over an hour blinking sleepily into the fire and chewing stubble.

"I'm fond of you, Mave," he whispered lamely, when he spoke again; "sorry for that night when I was mazed wi' drink and——"

"You remember that?" she exclaimed.

He nodded and grinned.

"You remember me?"

Again he nodded.

"I often thought o' you and wished for you. Curse me, I did."

"Don't talk like that—I loathed you then—you terrified me—I loathe you now," she cried, horrified to find that one purpose had been slowly working in his dark brain for so long. Her tone roused the beast in him at once, although a moment before he had been disposed to be absurdly sentimental.

"Loathe me! You're mine, though. I'll have you, girl, do my will wi' you, for all your loathing. Curse me, I will."

"Don't touch me—you shall never do that, never," she panted, clasping the knife. "And God be thanked —you cannot harm me—see."

She thrust the knife out at arm's length, though not near enough for him to snatch at it, for Mave, in this hour, had become wondrously cunning.

"Yes, I see. Wait, though—I'm in no hurry."

He spat the stubble out of his mouth and shifted his position so that he could recline at ease and yet

keep a wakeful eye on Mave. She herself never stirred, but sat huddled up on the filthy straw, hugging her knife and waiting for a movement from Avershaw. She was motionless, but the torpor had melted from her brain and she was fiercely resolute, like a wild mother defending the offspring of her womb. As a mother would stand between her child and wolfish hordes, so would she guard her body's chastity, which belonged not to her, but was consecrated to Robert Trayner. So the two sat through the long night, midst the moaning solitude of the barren woods, neither sleeping, Mave from fear of vile wrongs, Avershaw, because he knew he would wake to find her gone, even to the gibbet's foot; and so the dawn found them, starved, fever-flushed, and gnawed with wants and insatiable cravings, fierce hunted creatures of the lonesome wild.

XXIII

THE RETURN

IN the early morning, Mathew, the manservant of Daniel Deacon, awoke on the brink of delirium. His room was filled with a grey light that showed the most awful spectacle in human form he had ever beheld. A thin, ashen face was bending over him and grinning, the cheeks hollow and the chin covered by a tangled beard. Lank, matted reddish hair, fell to the shoulders of the apparition, and the sunken eyes burnt with maniac fire. Mathew's cry of terror was stifled by two bony hands that threatened to suffocate him on the slightest provocation. Mathew, by nature timorous and by custom peaceful, lay stiff in his bed, his hair uprising like quills and his heart —deprived of noisy outlet—swelled nigh to bursting. Time seemed to pause with him until, in a sudden jerk of intelligence, he recognized his master. Daniel Deacon had come home, Daniel Deacon was even now in actual flesh and blood before him. So much was certain—the grip of the bony fingers settled that question—but this was not the Daniel of former times. Indeed, no, the merest apparition; a poor disturbed ghost, that, in its wasted lineaments, horrid gapings, and drear spectral form, did emphasize the mortal vigour of the departed manhood in contrast to the present ignominy.

"Master," whispered Mathew, "oh, master, is it you—really you?"

The creature, leaning over the bed, bowed its head in faint acknowledgment and swayed fitfully. The voice of Mathew sank deep, the thin familiar utterance starting in its tones innumerable remembrances of Daniel's former life and former self.

"Master," whispered Mathew, "oh, master, is it you—really you?"

"Yes, Mathew—hush! no one must hear us."

Mathew leapt from his bed, his knees knocking inward and his head on the perpetual nod like some wooden marionette at a country fair. He wept unrestrainedly and wrung his hands, but retained sufficient sense to patter across the carpet and lock the door. Afterwards he leant against the bedpost, smitten with ague and wiping his tears on the arm of his night-shift, reminiscent in figure of a self-commiserating urchin whose recent stripes still smart.

"Oh, master," cried he, "why did you do it?"

"Do what, Mathew?"

"Why did you wish to kill Mr. Proudlove? Oh, master, who could have thought it of you—you—such a man—so good to us all—who could believe it?"

Daniel's eyes began to drizzle. Mathew's simple words affected him, the fellow's unfeigned grief at the ruin of his benefactor made a poignant appeal. His lamentations were infectious, and Daniel himself began to regret that which was long since irreclaimable.

"Mathew, what has happened here?" he asked in plaintive accents.

"Little, master. They've been here for you, master, and there's one nigh always, somewhere near the house. Oh, master, what made you do it?"

Daniel steadied himself. The sight of Mathew unmanned him, so he fell to his old habit of pacing the room with his back to the servant and his eyes covered.

"Tell me, Mathew—where is she—Barbara, my wife?"

"Gone, master. Her father, Mr. Jordan, called five days ago and took her home to his house."

"Did she say ought to you, Mathew?"

"Nothing."

"Did she weep, Mathew?"

"No, master."

"Not a tear?"

"No."

"Poor Barbara! Poor Barbara!"

"She's been at her woolwork all the time, master—only stopping for meals. It frightened me."

"What—what frightened you?"

"She was so calm."

"Why did that frighten you?"

"It seemed unnatural that she should be so. I used to go into her room four and five times a day to see if she was all right—just take a peep and go out again."

"And how was she, Mathew?"

"Always at her woolwork or looking out o' the window. I shall never forget when Mr. Jordan came for her, when they went away together. She called us all up—all the servants, and said she was off for a short visit to her father, but would come back in about a month. She said I was to keep the house. We all came from the room with tears running from our eyes, and you know that little Irish wench we took in the scullery a month since——"

"No, Mathew."

"Well, when she got in the kitchen she began to weep madly. 'It's drowned the poor soul looks,' said she. 'Mistress is well enough,' said I, trying to calm her. 'She eats well and sleeps sound.' 'By the blessed iron, it's a cold bed she'll sleep on before long,' said the Irish girl, and she looked so strange we all shuddered."

Daniel did not immediately answer. He had asked these several questions about Barbara, his wife, in the listless fashion of one whose mind, plagued with one overshadowing thought, seeks momentary relief in things of trivial interest; men who are under sentence of death exhibit this characteristic, evincing concern over absurd matters that in ordinary conditions would not trouble them a second's consideration. So it was that Daniel, for the first time in his life, must show anxiety for his wife, Barbara. But the interest could not be sustained, and Barbara was clean forgot on hearing a cock crow loudly in the outside yard. He remembered feeding poultry when a little boy at his father's house, throwing them crumbled bread sopped in milk, but retreating in great terror before the strutting advance of a huge cock bird, about which he had dreamt three nights in succession.

"Do you feed the fowls regularly, Mathew?" he asked.

Mathew's jaw dropped and he did not answer. Daniel did not appear to notice his silence, and by the time he had crossed the room and reached the window again he had forgot the existence of poultry as cleanly as a minute before he had forgotten Barbara. Mave filled his soul, and Mave would not be denied. Mave was pre-eminent in his thoughts, and would be banished by no flimsy device of small,

simulated interests. He could cheat Mathew—who thought him crazed—but was powerless to deceive himself, incapable of detaching his mind from the picture of Mave as he left her cowering with the brute Avershaw in the wilderness.

"Mathew," said he, "are any of the womenfolk awake?"

"No."

"Good. Go then to the pantry, and fill me a basket—bread, meat, anything you have there, and a bottle of wine."

His tone had acquired the solidity of one who acts on set purpose. Mathew, sitting on the bed, pulled on his breeches while Daniel pondered by the window.

"Master, what are you going to do?"

"Do! Not stay here to be caught like a rat."

"Oh, master, where will you go? Think, my dear master; they may catch you on the open road. Oh, Heaven, who would have thought things would have come to this!—that man so good——"

Mathew's bewailing gestures and exclamatory grief were growing tiresome. It procrastinated Daniel's flight.

"True, Mathew, they may catch me on the road, but I don't think so. I shall be far away before people are stirring."

"Far away! Where are you going, master?"

"I am returning to that place from which I came."

He sat down again on the bed next to Mathew, and hastily slipped off his shoes.

"I'm going to my room now," said he quietly. "Come to me there with the basket. Go now; I have no time to waste."

He brushed past the astonished manservant, and, carrying his shoes in his hand, crept stealthily down the stairs to his own bedroom. The sight of the familiar apartment did not cause him a pang. To Barbara's wools, petticoats, one of his whilom devotional books, and other oddments of domestic value, he gave no particular notice, but throwing off his ragged coat and waistcoat, rapidly changed into a new suit which he had only worn before on two occasions. Mathew found him in clean linen, busy cutting his hair with Barbara's scissors. The manservant had a basket on his arm, out of which peeped the neck of a wine bottle, a ham bone, and a loaf of bread.

"There is naught else in the larder," said he, deprecatingly.

"That will suffice me, Mathew. Open the bottle."

He drank a portion of the wine, and told Mathew he could be gone.

"Leave the back door open," said he. "I was obliged to break a window to get in—see, my wrist is cut."

"You are going then, master?"

"Almost directly."

Mathew burst out blubbering, fell on his knees and kissed Daniel's hand.

"You were always good to me, master. Oh, it must have been in an hour of madness that you did it. God preserve you—God guard you!"

Daniel looked down at him and felt overwrought The man's unaffected sorrow touched him deeply. They had been so intimate, so long together, and one has always affection for the object of one's own benevolence. He raised Mathew from his knees, and

collapsing suddenly, cried upon his shoulder. Then, seeing that the presence of the servant so unmanned him, he ordered him to leave the apartment, to go at once.

"Why not stay?" pleaded Mathew. "I will try —we can conceal you here."

"No, no; that is impossible."

"It would at least be safer than the open road."

"I cannot stay. I must—I must go back."

He pushed Mathew through the door, and locked it.

Half an hour afterwards, Mathew, still scared and blubbering, let him out from the house through the vegetable garden at the rear of the premises.

Neither spoke, but on the parting Daniel squeezed the servant's hand. Once out of the garden he turned sharply to the left, and when Mathew ascended to his own room again, which overlooked the high-road, the figure of his master was lost midst those wooded copses wherein Nat Avershaw had first directed Robert Trayner to Deacon's house.

Daniel travelled at full speed, now running, now walking swiftly, but he made no pause until he was an hour's journey from his home and tolerably safe in a wild and unfrequented section of the country. He was returning to Mave and to death. Why, having once reached his house, had he, a coward to the heart, not remained under its sheltering cover? It had offered him a possibility of safety, even of ultimate escape; a possibility and no more, but at that a coward's choice rather than bludgeoning at ruffian hands. He feared death beyond all other things—his blood was as water at the thought—and the prospect of Nat Avershaw's insatiable wrath at his return preyed on his vitals with griping terror.

There would be a combat, nay, not combat but simple slaughtering, and already he could feel the knife slide deep between his ribs, and quailed in anguish. And yet every step drew him nearer to the doom. He knew it, he dreaded and feared it, realizing the pains of a violent death, cursing his cowardice, and his physical impotence as opposed to Nat, fierce Titan of the woods. He started at every shadow, for fear of capture by Proudlove and his crew, suffering the delirious tortures of a madman's hell, yet . . . every step drew him nearer. Twice he stopped, flung himself face downward on the stubble, and swore, by God in heaven, that he would not stir another inch in the direction of the dingle hollow. He would be strong and master his frenzy. He would restrain this gnawing impulse that would impel him into the gaping jaws of destruction. He would progress no further, though he was obliged to lash himself to the very trees. Then he saw Mave, a weeping victim, saw her spent and ravaged by ruthless passion. He visioned the picture of her dishonour. He stopped his ears from her piteous cries. And so, stumbling to his feet once more, he was on the journey and drawing nearer. Once he came upon an old tree, riven and blackened by lightning blast, and here upon his knees he actually essayed to pray, wailing out a despairing appeal to the God he had abandoned, that he might be saved from himself and given, by miraculous aid, strength to conquer his passion. And whilst praying he squirmed at the thought that even while he squandered moments in vain supplications to an unhearing Deity, Mave might be fouled, her glamoured purity despoiled by leprous touch. Now was he delivered absolute into the power of fiends, and by them scourged and

alcerated beyond endurance. No thought had he more of retraction or whining prayer. Driven onward by prick and goad, he was drawing nearer. Sooner or later, no matter how long delayed by coward device, he realized that the dingle hollow would mark his journey's end, so why not now? The bosom of catastrophe was bared for the nursling; let him no longer procrastinate the period of his alienation from that heart; perchance there alone would he find comfort; let him hide there; let him lie deep between the breasts of his predestined mother! And again did he make prayerful invocations.

"O, mighty mother of multitudinous sorrows, I will no longer deny thee, no further strive against thy will or cry unto the chaste stars for pity. I will be content, blown in the wind's bluster, seeking only the oblivion of thy bosom whereon so many hapless babes suckle and have sucked themselves asleep!"

* * * * *

Night came down on the forests, night moonless and starless, with a great wind soughing through the trees. Mave had hardly stirred throughout the long day, but Nat Avershaw had busied himself in ordinary pursuits, though never moving beyond a circle of a hundred yards from Mave. He had cleaned the pannikin, filled it with water, and replenished the fire, not once referring to his passion by word or gesture. About noon he had roasted a small portion of rabbit flesh in the flame, Mave all the while silent and motionless as a stone pillar.

"Gi'e me the knife, girl," had been Avershaw's first word that day.

He examined the leg and back of the rabbit which appeared cooked.

"Gi'e me the knife, girl," he repeated. "I'll slice you a bit."

"I will not give you the knife."

"Not give me the knife?"

"No, I dare not."

He laughed loudly and tore the rabbit flesh with his hands, threw a portion to Mave, and began to devour the rest in ravenous hunger.

"Mighty feared you are o' me," he remarked.

"No; not while I have my knife, not at all," she answered.

"Why don't you eat?"

"I cannot."

"You must be nigh starving."

She made no reply.

"Are you starving?" he inquired again.

"Yes."

"Then why not eat? There's the vittals."

"I cannot. I should sicken. Do not pester me."

Again he laughed loudly, but relapsed into a silence not broken until the early evening, when the woods were dimmed in twilight. Avershaw, chewing stubble, looked waggishly towards the woods, and glanced from them to Mave.

"No sign o' Danny Deacon," said he, grinning.

"No."

"Still think he'll be coming back?"

"Yes, he must return."

Nothing angered Nat Avershaw so much as her persistent certainty that Deacon would come back. Mave seemed as positive of it as she was of her own life, and indeed perhaps more so. He did not refer further to the subject, but sat glowering at her from beneath lowered brows, and towards night once more his passion seized him. He felt depressed, morbid

under a premonition that the end was not far off, that he would either starve slowly to a skeleton in this lonesome hollow, or be swung high on the gallows. But before the end came he would enjoy one brutal pleasure, satisfy his sensual appetite, so that death should find him gorged and slumberous. He became restless, mumbling to himself, plucking at the stubble whilst his wolfish eyes seared Mave. Her whiteness tormented him, the sloping breasts and the bare soft feet gave such promise. His hands worked incessantly, and were wet with clammy moisture, his eyes felt dust-driven and his tongue parched. He knew there would be a struggle, and sat, his passion still fermenting as he stared at Mave, considering the likeliest plan for wresting the knife from her grasp. If he could distract her attention for a moment, divert it to some other object than himself, and then spring upon her and seize her wrist. But looking at her he became conscious that her features had suddenly changed expression. The pale lips were parted, the sunk cheeks slightly flushed, she moved and began rocking herself backwards and forwards like a child.

"O God," she exclaimed, "O God, what will happen now?"

Nat Avershaw was startled.

"Happen, girl! What will happen?"

She moaned for answer, and he saw her trembling in every limb. Nat heard a twig snap at no great distance towards the right, and the sound of creaking branches. He was aroused now to a sense of imminent danger. Could it be that at last they were discovered and the enemy approaching? He sprang to his feet, cudgel in hand, his head up and shoulders squared, searching every shadow in the wide of the

hollow with his great fierce eyes, and at that moment he looked a fine beast, magnificent and at bay. Another twig crackled and he heard approaching footsteps.

"Girl, girl, what is it?" he whispered hoarsely. "Is it them?—damn them. Is it them?"

His jaws snapped, and he glanced towards the beech tree, thinking it a stout wall where he could lean his back at the last gasp.

"No, no; it is Daniel. He is returning."

He gazed at the quivering girl in sudden contempt, deeming her demented.

"O God, what will happen?" she moaned.

The stone melted, she dropped the knife and began to beat at her breasts and shriek delirious cries, her face alive and working in every nerve. Nat had not time to give her heed, for out of the circle of trees that gradually narrowed down with an intervening space of bare stubble to the bushes, came a solitary figure, stumbling down the precipitous incline, and he saw from the limp gait and emaciated figure it was Daniel Deacon. Nat stood and watched him approach in breathless amazement. The sense of danger had gone, replaced by one of chilling stupefaction. Who was this, picking a way through briar and bramble, so fastidiously minded that he must go out into death with untorn raiment? Who was this scarecrow figure, limping placidly towards destruction? Was this Danny Deacon, coward and nerve bag?—Danny, the rag-bundle of life, the spunkless shiverer at shadows? Nat stood amazed and temporarily stunned before the miracle. So Mave had been right, her judgment had been justified, whilst he, Nat Avershaw, stood stultified, a fool. The glaring impudence of the whole thing became apparent. It was the vilest of insults that such as

Danny Deacon should scorn his commands and flout his will. Once, long ago, he had taxed his ingenuity for insult, and after mature deliberation had spat down a man's throat. He could then imagine no greater insult; but this—this surpassed all. And he was returning, this miserable limper, because he himself lusted for her, he was returning to cheat him of her. His blood cried out for her and he would not be denied. A thousand nerve-bags such as Danny, spewing out their vitals in his path, would not divert his ends by a hair's breadth. That Danny should think so was humorous. Seeing this he burst forth into loud laughter.

Daniel halted on the further side of the bushes, his head just apparent above the topmost briars.

"Nat—Nat Avershaw—Mave," he cried, in puling accents, that strove, but did not succeed, to simulate unconcern.

"Hallo! Who's there?" answered Nat. "What, you Danny Deacon—come back!"

"I've got the bread and the meat and the drink, Nat," quavered Daniel, peering with affrighted eyes over the bushes.

How terrible was the corporal presence of brute Avershaw. Yet he looked quite peaceable and calm.

"You have, Danny! Good luck to you. Come on, Danny. Curse me, I want the vittals."

The words sounded fair, but Daniel's heart sank. It would have promised better if there had been raging and ramping on Avershaw's part. There is a possibility always of quelling such tempests. But Nat was resolved, a decent greeting on his lips, and calmed out of all ramp and bluster. Yet Daniel, too, was resolved, and so tottered limping into the ring of barren stubble between the bushes, his face

livid beneath a poor, hopeless smile. He gave one quick look at Mave, and saw her blanched with terror, then swung the basket he carried high in his hand for Nat to see, grinning the while, though his eyes drizzled.

"Put 'em down, Danny Deacon," said Nat, pointing to the basket and advancing.

Daniel did his bidding, and waited. Nat, he noticed, had dropped his cudgel and slouched forward. Suddenly he sprang to one side, fell on one knee, and thrust out a giant hand, seemingly into the fire. He was up again with a shout of triumph, and Daniel caught the gleam of a knife. Mave was immovable.

"So you've come back, have you?" bellowed Nat. "Come back, you white-livered ass, and, damn my soul, I'll split your heart."

Daniel saw it all in one agonized moment, the shuffle, the gleam of the knife, and the hulking body crouched to spring. He saw it all, and despair gave him a semblance of courage. He waited not for the spring, but himself flung forward at his enemy's throat. The shock, the surprise, staggered the brute, and he reeled with two tense twisting hands squeezing at his throat. For the moment he was overborne, but for a moment only. The hands twisted and twined, but the huge neck was like iron. The rat-like teeth met in his left cheek, but men do not die by such wounds. A fierce scuffle of feet, hoarse grunting pants for breath, and then a last shrill scream of agonized despair. The knife stabbed deep in Daniel's breast, and he fell prone to the ground and lay quiet. Mave had fallen, face foremost, in the dust, and lay there abased and screaming. The dead man's blood bubbled out and reddened the

stubble. Nat tugged at the knife, drew it out, and wiped it on his shirt. Then he sat down and thought, the apple in his throat pumping up and down like mercury. He wiped the sweat from his brow, felt his aching throat, and spat heavily. He observed the dead man lying stiff in the stubble, his eyes bulging, and his hair already dabbled in his own blood. The sight was not pleasant, and Nat shifted his position. He knelt down, tore open the lid of Daniel's basket, and the sight of the fresh food made him ravenous. He had not enjoyed a square meal for three weeks, and he gnawed the ham to the bone, stuffing huge chunks of bread into his mouth, and gulping down the half bottle of wine at a single draught.

He felt eased of his hunger, only his torn cheek ran blood and smarted. The wine soon made him drowsy, he had been half-starved for so long that his head was weak and easily fogged by the vapour of liquor. He closed his eyes, clean forgetting Mave and the dead man's face, and, feeling stupidly happy, fell asleep.

He awoke soon, screaming, his vitals licked by fire, and every limb drawn with shocking agonies. He rolled over, screaming on the stubble and tearing it out by handfuls. Mave looked up and saw him writhing. But presently his eyes ceased to strain, and the flame currents ran cooler in his swollen veins. Curiously enough, his body was bent back in a semicircle, the head almost touching the hind part of the knees, and in this attitude he contrived to lie soundless and apparently content.

Night came down on the forests; night moonless and starless, with a great wind soughing over two dead men and a witless woman who was not happy.

XXIV

THE NEW CREED

IT was a decent red-tiled cottage, smoke slowly oozing from the chimney-stack; but April flowers, already fragrant in the garden, and leaves of tender green, drooping, trellis-wise, along its walls. A snug nook of pastoral England, backed by verdant prospects and a smooth lawn thick inlaid with early blossoms. Now was the second time that Robert Trayner called here, but the aspect of the place had so altered with seasonal change since his last visit full a month ago, that he hardly recognized it. He had journeyed by chaise, but on reaching the cottage had dismissed the vehicle to an inn, at no great distance, which he had observed on the road. He opened the small wooden gate, and walked down the front garden path, but before he reached the door it was held wide for his entrance by an old gentleman, attired somewhat in the fashion of a country parson. He was rather below the middle height, if anything, and had smooth, white hair, surmounting a clear fresh complexion, and a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. His manner was subdued, though ingratiating.

"Ah, here you are, Mr. Trayner," said he. "I expected you before this."

"Mr. Fellowes, if I remember?"

"Yes. Walk in please. You remember calling here before?"

"Perfectly."

Robert stood in a quaintly fashioned hall liberally adorned with oriental china. Mr. Fellowes ushered him from the hall into a neat parlour, cased in books and brightened with old china. Robert sat down, and laid aside his stick and hat, still at a perfect loss to fathom the cause for the message which had brought him hither from a considerable distance.

He had met Mr. Fellowes once before, when he had been beating every highway and byway in search of Mave, when frantic at her loss he had been still urged onward by a hope most slothful in death, which obstinately refused to admit finality. He had met Mr. Fellowes, asked him, as he had asked everybody, for news of the lost girl; and although the old gentleman could tell him nothing of Mave, he had evinced such kindliness and understanding that poor Robert, his aching heart longing for a friend to whom he could pour out his stifled sorrow, accepted his hospitality, and told him much relating to his private history and the story of Mave. It turned out that Mr. Fellowes had a brother in London, who had done business with some members of the Trayner family and so the two became quite intimate.

Robert and Mr. Fellowes now sat opposite to one another in the parlour and paused, neither being inclined to start the conversation; Robert, because he was rather bewildered by the situation, and Mr. Fellowes because the young man's saddened look made the task he had assumed one of increased difficulty.

"You were surprised at my message?" he asked, playing with his handkerchief.

"Very. I must confess I cannot possibly understand how you came to know that I was staying at Marside."

"I learnt so much from a post-boy who passed this road. He came from the house where you were staying."

"You asked him if he knew me?"

"I have been asking everybody in the neighbourhood for the last fortnight. I was quite certain that you had not returned to London."

"You have news for me?"

"Yes. Have you seen the papers?"

"The papers! Oh yes, I have seen them."

"And were you not interested?"

"Very little. The villains were nothing to me."

Mr. Fellowes shifted his position. He moved his chair so that he could look through the window. It was easier to talk thus than facing Robert. He spread a news-sheet on his knees, smoothed it and adjusted his spectacles.

"Allow me to read you a passage from the report, young man," said he. "I shall then be able the more readily to explain why I have summoned you here."

Robert nodded and leant forward, resting his head between his hands. He watched his host intently, and saw him plainly ill at ease. The old gentleman cleared his throat and began to read.

"Yesterday, Mr. John Fellowes, a gentleman of the most respectable character, residing in N——, made a most gruesome discovery whilst out walking in those large tracts of uncultivated land which lie immediately to the North of Marside. The discovery was no other than the bodies of two dead men, lying at about five yards' distance from each other, at the bottom of a declivity almost in the centre of the forests. On closer inspection it at once transpired that the unfortunate men had come by violent

deaths, the one showing a large body wound, evidently inflicted by a knife. The cause of death in the other case is as yet a matter for conjecture, but——"

"That was what you learnt from the papers?" said Mr. Fellowes, folding up his news-sheet.

"Yes, I read that."

"And afterwards you learnt that these same bodies proved to be those of Daniel Deacon and Nat Avershaw, the two malefactors who were being hunted for the attempted murder of the man Proudlove?"

"Yes, I read that also," answered Robert, a little wearied.

"The bodies now are swinging in gibbet-chains on Marside common."

"Yes, yes; I know all this, Mr. Fellowes."

"And you know that Deacon's servant has confessed his master paid a visit to his house one night, and that after he left, the servant discovered a certain bottle, supposed to contain poison, had been emptied."

"Mr. Fellowes, I know all this. How could I help knowing it? It is in everybody's mouth. This is no news, no news whatever."

The young man had risen to his feet. He approached Mr. Fellowes, his shoulders squared, his look determined. When he spoke it was almost fiercely, but through his teeth.

"Tell me the truth," said he; "if you have any real news, tell me. What you have told me I already knew. It is of no interest. Only one thing is of interest to me. One question only is burning in my heart. I spoke freely to you when we met before. You must know that what I say is truth."

"Yes, I know that. I—I am coming to that now."

Mr. Fellowes now also got up from his chair and, gathering a strength of purpose, fully confronted Robert. But he took off his glasses so that he should not see the young man's face. He caught Robert's hand in his with a sudden impulsive gesture and held it. One had almost thought these two were saying farewell.

"Can you be brave, Mr. Trayner?" said he.

"Yes. I can face anything now. . . . Oh, anything. I have no hope."

"Listen, then. The report of what I discovered that evening in the woods was not truly written in the newspapers."

"Not truly written?"

"It is said that I discovered two dead bodies. That is not true. I—I discovered three."

He dropped Robert's hand, and, turning on his heel, crossed the room. His eyes were moist, and he had no glasses, but he could dimly discern the figure of Robert. The outline of the figure was very uncertain against the dark wainscoting on the walls. Mr. Fellowes picked up a book and opened it carefully, which was ridiculous because he could not see a single word. But he was a virtuous man, and abashed in the presence of deep emotion. Robert was crying.

The news came as no great surprise to him, because for some time past the conviction that Mave was dead had grown in his mind almost to a certainty. Nothing else could account for her complete loss, her sudden effacement from the earth. But this preconception of her death in no way lightened the burden of his sorrow, and indeed he was surprised

to find, now that the bell tolled irrevocably, how much of hope had been up to the last secreted in his heart. He sat and wept unrestrainedly, and Mr. Fellowes spoke no word, but presently came and placed a kindly hand on the broken boy's shoulder.

"Tell me," sobbed Robert, "my friend, tell me how it all happened. . . . Oh, dear God, my little Mave! . . . Tell me all, Mr. Fellowes, tell me all."

"I will tell you all. When I discovered her I knew at once who it was. Deacon, of course, I had seen several times, and that, with what you told me, explained the identity of the other two. I do not think she had been dead more than a day when I found her. I am not a man to act on impulse, and I thought over the matter well before I took any steps in the affair. For your sake, for the sake of my brother's friendship with your uncles, for the sake of the poor girl herself, I was determined that she should have decent burial. I knew what fearful ignominy was in waiting for the bones of the other wretches, and I was resolved she at least should not share it."

Robert heard Mr. Fellowes' voice from a distance. The words came to him as through a dream.

"I had discovered the bodies fully two days before I communicated with the authorities. Meanwhile the girl slept in decent resting-place."

"You buried—her? My heart's precious one? You buried her?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In a quiet spot somewhere in the forests. I carried her as far as I could into the forests and at last dug her grave—I am always digging in my garden, you know—in a region of the woods I do not remember

to have visited before. It is most wild in character, and I should say practically untrod by human foot. When I had dug the grave I laid her there, covered her over, and went away. I could not find the spot now if I wished."

"Oh, my friend, that was wrong of you—yes, wrong. You should have marked the place. I could have found it then, and have dug down to her with my hands, and perhaps shared her rest. My dead darling, my Mave!"

"It is perhaps better as it is."

Robert did not answer, and a long silence ensued. Mr. Fellowes went out into his gardens. The spring flowers went to sleep in the twilight. The dusk deepened, and finally melted into night. Mr. Fellowes ate his frugal supper, and when he had lit his candle for bed, took another look at his visitor in the parlour. He caught a fleeting glimpse of him by light of candle, and then recoiled. He blew out his candle and crept up the stairs on tip-toe. He did not undress, but, selecting a book, tried to read. The dawn was just faintly stirring when the sound of Robert's crying gradually ceased. Then Mr. Fellowes descended the stairs again, and as silently as possible locked the parlour-door. His old woman-servant was denied all admission into the room for more than a day.

* * * * *

At the end of a three weeks' visit Robert spoke of departure, but at Mr. Fellowes' request, agreed to defer it for a day or so. He had poured out his heart to Mr. Fellowes, told him the true history of Mave, as he knew it; his own heart's cravings and his inmost thoughts. His grief had quietened and his tears were dry, his sorrow having become solid,

abiding, and purged of all adolescent froth. On the last night of his visit he sat with his host before the cheerful parlour fire and talked quite reasonably. The solitary old man had grown dear to him, as a friend made in affliction, and he spoke to him now in perfect freedom without reserve. Mr. Fellowes, it seems, had a receptive capacity. He owned the divine gift of understanding those half shades of thought and emotion which we hint at and are powerless to express, and for this reason he proved for Robert at such a period an ideal friend.

"What a tragedy! What a tragedy!" murmured Robert, looking into the fire. "Think of it! Think of how it has all ended. Deacon's body swinging in gibbet-chains with the other wretch and . . . and . . . she . . . Mave lying somewhere in the forests; my soul there too. What a tragedy!"

"Be careful, my friend, that you do not deepen the tragedy."

Robert smiled drearily.

"Have you thought about the future?" asked Mr. Fellowes, who on this last night appeared to have curiously hardened in manner.

"The future!"

"Your future."

"Oh, God, no!"

"You are wrong, then. Let me give you some advice. You are still young and——"

"Young!"

"Yes, still young; besides, the oldest need advice at times. Believe me, I feel for you, my young friend; I know how actual is your grief; but now I am going to talk to you from another standpoint. I am going to talk to you from the standpoint of your uncle Peter."

"Uncle Peter! Ugh!"

"Ah, you are wrong there again. You have your point of view, and from that vantage ground of vision poor Uncle Peter no doubt appears the basest scoundrel: But unhappily there are many points of view to every question. You think Uncle Peter a villain; Uncle Peter thinks you a very wild, dissolute young cub. Now, for my part, I am equally assured that you are a most well-meaning young man, and that your uncle Peter is a shrewd and clever man of business, and withal affectionate at heart. You have told me the whole facts of the case, and I think I am capable of looking at it through impartial spectacles. In the first place, Uncle Peter, when he takes over his brother's business, finds you, as the saying is, at a loose end. You have been sent by his brother to a distant part of the country to transact certain businesses. You stay there an inordinate long time, and make heavy disbursements from the firm's exchequer. When at last you return you confess that you have fallen madly in love—and the word 'love,' remember, has now lost much of its intended significance through base and idle usage—with a young woman who has been employed as an assistant in a little provincial shop. . . . No, hear me out. That Uncle Peter has a point of view is as much a fact as it is that you have one, whether his point of view be right or wrong. Thinking men examine all facts impartially. Please be silent a moment. . . . Well, you declare your intention of retiring from business, and of marrying this young woman, and for that purpose demand further grants of money. On the face of it, you must have appeared to Uncle Peter a most impudent fellow, whose portion, unless summarily checked, was clearly ruin. Your uncle

laughs at your astounding story, and sets you to the desk, whereupon you justify his suspicions by theft, stealing ten guineas and his horse. You had now degraded yourself to the level of the lowest creatures, and the world would have granted you but little sympathy had your uncle seized you and seen you hanged. Instead of this, however, he despatches messengers in pursuit of the thief, who, when they eventually reach you, bring word that all will be forgiven on your undertaking to make amends by sober conduct, and some show of a disposition to earn an honest livelihood. This clemency, mind you, is shown by the uncle whom you have never ceased to call villain. Do you accept his offer expressing gratitude and contrition? No: you insult his messengers and deride his offer, living meanwhile on ill-gotten gains, the proceeds of your uncle's horse, which you sold. So much have I learnt from your own lips, and, in the eyes of common sanity, you stand self-condemned as a very hardened and evilly disposed young man."

Mr. Fellowes paused. Happily for Robert's feelings, his tone had been kindlier than his words.

"Is that all, sir?" asked Robert, looking up resolutely, but without impudence.

"There of course remains the other side of the question."

"And that?" interjected Robert, quietly.

"That, my young friend, is an outmoded point of view, which a great Spanish author has shown can be productive of naught but ridicule and calamity in the polite world of to-day."

"Don Quixote was a madman. He tilted at windmills," exclaimed Robert.

"How small was his folly, my young friend,"

replied Mr. Fellowes, "compared to yours. You are crazed enough to fancy that the individual is at liberty to follow the heart's bent. You are tilting against the whole world, against the very fabric of society—a far stouter substance than any windmill. Upon my word, you are less witted than poor Lancelot Greaves."

Robert's face flushed painfully beneath its greyness.

"Mr. Fellowes, I must ask you not to talk in so light a tone," he said. "I have never heard you talk so before, and am surprised that you could do so."

"I did not mean to hurt you, my young friend —Robert."

"No, no; but what you have said is simply a ridiculous travesty of the facts. I loved Mave, my poor darling, as truly as man ever loved woman. I love her now. My heart is in the woodlands with her."

It was now Mr. Fellowes' turn to interrupt.

"Good," cried he; "let your heart rest there. Do not trouble further about your heart. Believe me, I thoroughly understand the truth in this affair. I know your love and sorrow to be actual, but the world does not allow a man, because he sorrows, to wander in the wilderness in sackcloth and ashes, there to spend his days in idle moaning. That, I say, is in the basest order of cowardice."

"Cowardice! Maybe, Mr. Fellowes, but if to seek Nepenthe is cowardice, I acknowledge myself a coward."

"You talk glibly, my young friend. . . . Robert, you talk glibly; but there is only one Nepenthe for you."

"And that?"

"Work at your uncle's desk."

"Work at Uncle Peter's desk! Impossible! Spend my days in reckoning accounts! Live my life in that dreary Cheapside office! Absurd! Is this the future you were discussing?"

"What alternative future have you to offer?"

Robert pondered, but was silent, and Mr. Fellowes watched his working face in half-pitying amusement.

"Listen," cried he, "you are at the present moment intoxicated with woe. You are young, and blinded by grief. You swear that the grief will be eternal, that the ponderous gloom will never lift from your soul. My poor Robert, you have yet another sorrow in store."

"Let me hear it," said Robert, dully.

"The additional sorrow awaits you of discovering sooner or later that the grief which you deem eternal is after all a diminishing quantity. The sharper pangs of affliction will subside. It will be a humiliating discovery, but one, nevertheless, that you are bound to make. The grief will dissolve, some of it, I think, becoming part of you, so that you will be chastened and made a better man; and if this is so, as I believe, you should be comforted in knowing that your sorrow was of the divinest order known to us poor inhabitants of earth. But the ponderous gloom will lift, and imperceptibly you will be interested once more in the ordinary avocations of life. You will go about your business; for life, which is strong in your veins, will not be denied. Come, will you listen to my advice?"

"Yes, yes, I will listen. You have been very kind to me, Mr. Fellowes."

"Very well, take notice of my words, then. This is my advice. Return to London, make peace with

your uncle, labour at the office desk, acquire honestly gotten money, make a position, leave your heart in the woodlands, attend city functions, marry a decent housewife, take a villa in Paddington, cultivate a flower garden, go regularly to church, rear up a family of healthy children."

Robert gazed at his host in amazement. The picture of futurity that Mr. Fellowes had drawn seemed despicable and loathsome, and yet he knew that such was the portion of many worthy men who seemed at least comfortably happy. Perhaps they too, at least some of them, had been even as he in youth, and had left their hearts in the woodlands. Perhaps, so marvellous and unaccountable are a man's transmigrations through the iron grooves of destiny, he, too, would eventually subside into such a state of passive respectability. He sat down on the chair again, and, bursting into tears, hid his face.

"Oh, Mr. Fellowes," cried he, "I am afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid lest I should ever sink to the degradation you have pictured. Oh, God, if I should ever prove false to Mave, unworthy of my love!"

"Unworthy of Mave! False to Love! Young man, no false heroics. You tell me you loved Mave as a woman, not as a poet's notion, and that you wished to marry her. Very well, prove worthy of her as a woman; prove worthy of the regard you inspired in her breast by living an honest and upright life. That is all we men can give to Love."

Mr. Fellowes yawned and lit his candle.

"I feel very tired, and am going to bed," said he, stretching out his arms. "Think well, Robert, over all that I have said. I am afraid that my words have not pleased you. You would have liked me better

if I had played pander to your woes and indulged in lacrymose condolences. Time will prove if I have not filled the better part. You are sad now; you are thinking of the dead. Do not weep, Robert, for, believe me, it is the living rather than the dead who need our tears. . . . Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Fellowes; I know you mean me well," answered Robert, rising and grasping the outstretched hand.

As soon as he heard Mr. Fellowes' door click Robert put on his hat, and, letting himself gently out of the house, walked towards the woods. The night was fine, the moon risen high and swathed in fleecy vapour, and the heavens studded with innumerable bright stars. The young mourner went down into the woodlands, and, comforted by the mighty hush of night, wept there and prayed for guidance. Mave was with him. Somewhere her body lay at rest beneath the green turf, but her spirit was here abroad. After all, no more fitting place of rest could human ingenuity have contrived for her whom he had called in the first days of their little love season Mave o' the Woods, who was in soul and body consecrate to the forests, one who, glamoured by their moonshine mystery, had been so sadly fair. No turf would lie so lightly on her rose bosom as woodland turf, no blossoms spring so sweetly from her crumbling flesh as woodland flowers. Here, then, was the peacefullest spot for her long repose. Here might she lie in green sanctuary, her spirit haunting darksome pools and ferny coves. The winds would whisper to her their old secrets learnt of the sea's cry, the dews lie scattered gem-like beneath her frail ghost feet, and the flowers, knowing her, make soft obeisance before the passing of her virgin soul. Robert's

tears fell thick and unrestrained, and, abasing himself in the solitude of the forest, he spoke unto Mave for the last time. . . . O Mave, my lost darling, rest quiet. We two have loved, been one by kindred pulses, and travelled thus far together, and here you sleep deep, my precious one, in your woodland home. Here, also, we make farewell. Yours is the better portion, Mave, believe me, for the day's burden lies with the living. You at least have found repose and a home quietude, but I am still at the wind's will, driven onward to some unknown bourne of future occasion. In my heart lives our perished dream, and mine eyes are blind with tears. The bitterness of herbs is in my mouth, and Sorrow doth chasten me with scorpion whips and divers blows, and I am faint with many wounds, my heart grey with regret. May I be meek, Mave, even as you, even as a child; may I be reconciled to mother Sorrow, and may she chasten me and teach me that I may express my soul. Sorrow shall be my God and my religion. Her will I follow faithfully: walk in her ways most penitent, and abide in whatever haven she shall ordain for my harbourage, even as you, Mave, even as a child! . . .

* * * * *

The first canons of Robert's new creed are labour and humility, so the end of a week found him on the pavements of Cheapside, staring up at his uncle Peter's office.

PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED, LONDON AND BECCLES.

A SELECTION OF BOOKS PUBLISHED BY METHUEN AND COMPANY: LONDON 36 ESSEX STREET W.C.

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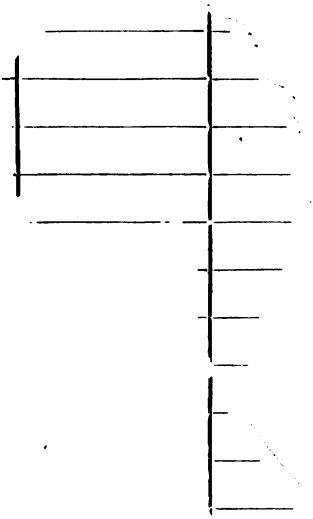
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